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THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

**Walk a Mile in Their Shoes: Empathy and Rehumanization in Community-Based  
Programming**

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE  
IN MUSEUM STUDIES  
AND THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE  
IN SOCIOLOGY/ ANTHROPOLOGY

DEPARTMENTS OF PERFORMING ARTS AND VISUAL CULTURE AND HISTORY

BY

RACHEL BALDWIN

APRIL 2020

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Rachel Baldwin submitted on April 23, 2020.

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MUSE Program Director

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## Abstract

In the past decade, museums have been changing their missions, definitions, and exhibitions to focus on activism and the interpretation of the controversial and polarizing. Through exhibiting controversy and engaging visitors with it, museums have attempted to foster feelings of empathy. This paper summarizes the results of the research done on community-based projects from the 2020 exhibition *Hostile Terrain 94* and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). *Hostile Terrain 94* is an international pop-up exhibit concerning the humanitarian crisis at the US-Mexico border. RIT will be exhibiting a piece of this map which will come together at the National Mall in the fall of 2020. I interviewed two museum professionals, one from *Hostile Terrain 94* and the other from the USHMM, to gain insight on empathy-making in museums and the role of museums in the community. I also researched the USHMM's past and present community-based projects to base the structure of a new program for the *Hostile Terrain 94* exhibition at RIT. This research will contribute to an ongoing discussion in the field on ways to use community-based programming to open discussion over contemporary human rights issues. It will also suggest ways in which museums and exhibitions can engage their communities using programming to foster empathy.

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## Introduction

The best way to start a paper based on a theory of empathy and rehumanization, is to begin with a story many people might be able to empathize with. This is a story of my personal stake in this paper, this research, and in the hope for a better future for Latinos. I am Mexican-American, at least that's what I like to write on pieces of paper that ask you to fill out your ethnicity. However, I am also very white, physically, culturally, and hereditarily, if you look at my dad's side of the family. My mother's side of the family lives in California, Nevada, and other western states. They all have the tan skin, dark beauty marks, dark hair, and dark eyes. Many of them speak Spanish and both my Nana and Tata, meaning my Grandma and Grandpa, are fluent in it. My Tata loves beans, and when I say he loves them I mean he lives off of them like no other food exists. The only other foods I've seen him eat are tortillas, salsa, rice, and meats. He's the hardest working person I've known in my entire life, and I like to think I know a lot of hardworking people. He's friendly, kind, and he's good to my Nana, who he loves very much. He doesn't need to tell me that he does, I know and I can tell that he does. My Nana is a strict woman, but she needed to be. She raised my mother and her siblings after all. She loves her jewelry and her matching clothes, we like to call it her bling. She cooks the best food to have graced my mouth and I always crave it when I go back home to the east coast. She always wants to provide for all her children, but sometimes it gets difficult to do so. So, knowing this about my family, you might understand why I chose this topic and what I feel when I hear nothing but the worst of opinions about Latinos. I don't see Latinos as a faceless mass of people storming in through the southern border. I see my Nana and Tata, my mother, and my family. By the end of this paper, it is my goal that someone will understand empathy, rehumanization, and what we can

do to foster it. Maybe that faceless crowd, one by one, will turn into co-workers, neighbors, and friends.

In the museum field, exhibitions in the past decade have begun focusing on activism and interpreting increasingly polarizing and controversial topics. These exhibitions have motivated museums into questioning their beliefs of museum neutrality and the public to react strongly for and against the exhibits. These questions and issues have taken precedence not only in museum literature, but in discussions and plans for action.

There are a few exhibitions and museums that have taken the lead in exhibiting historical and contemporary controversial topics and engaging visitors with it. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), located in Washington DC, does exactly this. This museum creates an experience for visitors to engage throughout with the material presented. This museum uses their exhibition space with the intention to create the feeling of being herded into a camp. In many of the spaces, visitors walk through reproductions of camp gates and freight cars as their only means to continue through the museum. That immersive experience of walking through an environment similar to ones from the past allows visitors to learn about the Holocaust through visual elements and physical experience. This makes it easier for them to understand and empathize, to some small degree, with others who were forced into a similar space.

What makes the Holocaust Museum a leader in exhibiting controversial material is that they not only interpret the past, they do the same with the present. They use contemporary issues that resonate with the Holocaust and inform their visitors about them. They also encourage their visitors to act against genocide and antisemitism today. This sends a message to the visitor saying “It didn’t stop at the Holocaust. The world isn’t done with genocide and antisemitism yet



and neither should you be.” This connects the past events of the Holocaust to events people will recognize in the present and the future. At the intersection between the past and present where the Holocaust Museum has created a robust dialogue, visitors are engaged with human rights issues. As the museum memorializes and interprets these issues, they are forming a space for visitors to empathize with marginalized groups and begin a dialogue about contemporary racial and ethnic controversy.

*Hostile Terrain 94* is an international exhibition with about 150 hosting partners, the majority of which are in the United States. However, there are also a few in Australia, Canada, Mexico, South Africa, South America, and across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Many of these installations will also be held at universities and other educational institutions. In the fall of 2020 the exhibition will come together and make its final appearance at the National Mall in Washington, DC, in time for the next presidential election.<sup>2</sup> In the past few years, the US has experienced an increase in nationalism, coupled with contempt towards illegal immigrants and many “outsiders” looking to settle or work. In America, the US-Mexico border policy has become stricter and more aggressive. Taking this into consideration, this is both a timely and controversial exhibition.

This exhibition is set up as a series of toe-tags that will be pinned to the locations where migrants died along the border. The border will be represented by a 25ft long map, intended to be hung up on a wall. These tags of orange and tan will be laid against each other, many of them overlapping, to create a cascade of marked deaths. The blank toe tags sent to each hosting partner require teams of people to fill them out by writing names, cause of death, and age supplied by the

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<sup>1</sup>“Hosting Partners,” Undocumented Migration Project, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/hosts>)

<sup>2</sup>“Installation,” Undocumented Migration Project, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/installation>)

organizers.<sup>3</sup> These writing sessions are a type of visitor engagement built into the exhibition. By collecting volunteers to write these toe tags, people will be interacting with this material and the exhibition. Writing will also give people the ability to reflect about what they're writing and what it means. By attending these writing sessions and learning about the difficulties, consequences, and events happening at the border, people begin to empathize with immigrants and reframe their understandings of the border crisis.

Before the writing sessions done at the RIT campus, there were eight prototypes held elsewhere that attracted media attention. Cypress College and the Penn Museum both had prototype *Hostile Terrain 94* exhibitions and the media interviewed people after their writing sessions. I will be discussing what volunteers experienced and said at these two prototype sessions. This is to gain a better understanding as to how interaction with the exhibition forms feelings of empathy and how knowledge can begin that process.

Through exhibiting controversy, creating programs, and engaging visitors with it, museums have begun making an attempt to foster feelings of empathy in many people so that they can take the perspective of others. This detail should not be ignored or diminished and takes on interesting notions when considering the 2019 ICOM proposal for a new definition of museums. This definition includes the line, "They [museums] are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."<sup>4</sup> This proposed definition

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Museum Definition," ICOM, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://icom.museum/en/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

marks a significant point in the history of museums, one where they can no longer claim neutrality and that actively moves towards a better future. The *Hostile Terrain 94* exhibition and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum engage visitors in historical and contemporary racial and ethnic issues that foster understanding of social prejudices. Understanding the capacity exhibitions have for fostering empathy and developing exhibitions that address difficult topics is part of the future of exhibitions and is part of what can make the world a better place to collect, preserve, and exhibit.

## **Literature Review**

Research Questions:

How do museums use their exhibition space and programs to engage visitors and their communities with racial and ethnic oppression, leading to increased empathy and humanization?

What can the museum and audience gain from the interpretation and engagement with controversial material? What are the concerns museums have covering controversial exhibitions and programs? How do museums mediate those concerns and plan their exhibitions and programs with controversy in mind?

### **Introduction**

In the aftermath of a humanitarian crisis, whether one year or 50 years later, museums have acted as memorials, educators, and stewards of the past. Many museums have claimed neutral positions and objective voices in light of these matters. In the past decade, museums have been changing their missions, definitions, and exhibitions to focus on activism and the interpretation of the controversial and polarizing. This shift in thought has been marked, in part, by the proposed new definition of a museum by ICOM in 2019, which was already mentioned, and which was voted down by ICOM. The literature focuses on the uses of activism in museums, concerns in covering controversy, controversy management, and the benefits to the museum and community. In addition, two case examples will be examined to show how literature and thought has been put into practice in the field.

### **Relationships between Museums and their Audiences**

For the first few sections of my literature review I will be covering general topics and then extrapolate some ideas that apply to engaging audiences with the US-Mexico border crisis.

Jennie Schellenbacher in “Empowering Change: Towards a Definition of the Activist Museum - Museum-ID,” discusses that feeling of need in museums to be relevant and how activism has become part of the solution. “If museums can inspire action in their visitors to become more active citizens, more engaged...more informed about how their everyday actions can affect real change and empowered to make change happen, the more relevant museums will be.”<sup>5</sup> It is through activism, she argues, that museums will draw people in and cement themselves in their communities. It is when a museum actively engages their visitors, asks their opinion, gives them the tools and knowledge to think critically, and provides a place of open and mediated discussion that they become more relevant. Museum relevance, in this view, is linked to the visitor, the community, and to places outside the museum doors.

The way museums are being described when working with the community reminds me of a symbiotic relationship. Tom Hanchett in “Rethinking Immigrant Integration in the American South: Can Museums Help Communities Address a Major Social Challenge?” seems to agree when he writes on what museums and the public can gain from covering controversial material. “People want to be listened to. They want to reach out and connect, though they often do not know how. A museum that offers those opportunities, that becomes known for looking “outward,” will be respected and valued—not simply as a repository for historical and cultural knowledge, though that will not diminish, but as a living, active, useful player in civic life.”<sup>6</sup> Through the use of history and the museum’s power in the community, he believes that together

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<sup>5</sup> “Empowering Change: Towards a Definition of the Activist Museum - Museum-ID,” Museum ID, April 11, 2018,

<https://museum-id.com/empowering-change-towards-a-definition-of-the-activist-museum/>)

<sup>6</sup>Tom Hanchett, “Rethinking Immigrant Integration in the American South: Can Museums Help Communities Address a Major Social Challenge?,” *Remix*, 2019, pp. 182-185, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520960114-036>)

they can address topics that seem alienating to funders for the museum and polarizing for the public. “We have found that it increases the funder pool. Corporations and foundations want to build better communities.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, museums can work in combination with the community towards a mutually beneficial goal. The battle for the relevancy of museums is being attributed to the willingness and ability a museum has to engage and present topics that concern and challenge their audiences. The engagement of these topics should also then work towards the intellectual and social benefit of the museum and visitors.

### **Concerns about Interpreting Controversial Topics**

Some articles look at relations between museums and the public as risk-reward. In these they believe that for every risk they take museums leave themselves open to criticism, news slander, and other potentially harmful actions. In particular, covering human rights topics is automatically controversial, “Many of these exhibitions are implicitly controversial, since human rights cannot easily be separated from the political domain.”<sup>8</sup> In “Museums as Centers of Controversy,” Willard Boyd writes about that feeling of vulnerability and how the authoritative voices that museums have taken in the past negatively affect and cannot be used in controversial topics. “Today, museums have an assumed authority that makes them vulnerable to attack in the way that any influential source of authority is. . . . Our response to these attacks is too often retreat or arrogance.”<sup>9</sup> He also addresses internal conflict, particularly between funders and staff, as a possibility. He proposes the idea, “What happens when conflicts between funders and staff

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Terence M. Duffy, “Museums of ‘Human Suffering’ and the Struggle for Human Rights,” *Museum International* 53, no. 1 (2001): pp. 10-16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0033.00292>

<sup>9</sup> Willard L Boyd, “Museums as Centers of Controversy,” *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): pp. 185-228, [www.jstor.org/stable/20027572](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027572), p.186-187)

can not be resolved?”<sup>10</sup> He gives the example of a government funder, which he says may not discriminate on viewpoints in regulation or as a funder. He also raises the point that although their financial situation may be dire in the short term, the museum will find reward in the communities’ respect followed by financial support.<sup>11</sup>

### **Controversy Management and Exhibition Planning**

For each concern museums have in presenting controversial material, articles have been written to ease the concerns and formulate solutions. Their goal is to encourage museums to become active participants in their audience’s lives, manage controversial content, and to create learning experiences through the use of controversy. The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), wrote an article called “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy,” that provides a base guideline that museums can choose to follow. These guidelines help museum staff formulate plans, create documents, and engage visitors with controversy while managing backlash and possible volatile situations.

Their ideal situation is that a museum will serve as a place of open discussion and diverse opinions that can come together in a safe and educational environment. They highlight three strategies that museums can take to fit this model “1. Public Statement Affirming Commitment to Artistic and Intellectual Freedom of Speech 2. Preparation in Advance of Upcoming Programs and Potential Controversy, through agreement on clear curatorial procedures, feedback mechanisms, and educational plans; 3. Procedures for Addressing the Press or Complaints from the Public after an Exhibition or Special Program Opens.”<sup>12</sup> After they list each step, they go into

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.219

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.220

<sup>12</sup> “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy,” National Coalition Against Censorship, January 2, 2020, <https://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>)

detail on certain programs and documents that can be made. They also made a template for a freedom of speech commitment which they noted could be changed to fit different museums. They stress being clear and devoted to freedom of speech, to plan before enacting, and to engage the community.

### **Benefits to the Community and Museum**

As mentioned before, museums and the community can benefit from the exhibition and interpretation of controversial material. I've identified three stakeholders the literature mentions: the museum visitor, civil rights groups, and the museum itself. Museum visitors, in a survey done by MuseumNext, were shown to more likely want museums to be opinionated on social issues than non-museum goers. "A *MuseumNext* survey found that many Americans are unsure whether museums should "have something to say on social issues" ....The study pointed out that more frequent museum goers were more likely to say that museums should express opinions about social issues than non-museums goers as were younger visitors."<sup>13</sup> Of the people asked whether or not museums should say something about social issues, about 40.5% were unsure, 27.5% said yes and 31% said no.<sup>14</sup> While there still is an ambivalence in a broad American audience, some visitors seem to desire to hear what museums have to say.

If museums are to be places of education for the public, it wouldn't make sense to exclude the uncomfortable or offending. It would be like taking a lesson about World War II and never covering the concentration camps, the refugees, or the horrors of war itself. The public

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<sup>13</sup> Liz Maurer, "The History and Possibility of Museum Activism," Design and Production Incorporated (Design and Production Incorporated, July 7, 2017), <https://www.d-and-p.com/blog/2017/7/7/the-history-and-possibility-of-museum-activism>)

<sup>14</sup> Jim Richardson, "Should Museums Be Activists?," Social Impact (MuseumNext, December 23, 2019), <https://www.museumnext.com/article/should-museums-be-activists/>)



isn't being well informed and they may begin to lose their trust in museums. By covering these topics, the public will be better informed and the museum can reestablish and redefine its place in the community. "Discussion and engagement as a mission-driven activity flows from an evolving point of view of museums' obligations to the people and communities around them. In taking on these tasks, they redefine their public value."<sup>15</sup> Museums may find that by combining their cultural power and extensive knowledge with discussions of human rights, they will be refreshed in the public's eye.

Geraldine Adams notes in her writing "When Museum Activism Comes to Life," that the interactive travelling exhibit, Journey to Justice, has served her community. Journey to Justice is an exhibition on past struggles for social justice and human rights in the UK. She writes, "Our multi-arts, interactive exhibition is a catalyst for local communities and action for social justice."

<sup>16</sup> This article provides an example of how museum visitors truly engage and desire to know what museums have to say about controversial topics. They look to the exhibition and the people who run it for information, discussion, and opportunity to reach out and act.

Duffy Terance in "Museums of 'Human Suffering' and the Struggle for Human Rights." discusses a multiplicity of different human rights museums, also known as museums of "Human Suffering," and how they have affected their respective country's human rights development and remembrance. According to Terance, "It is certainly the privilege of these museums of 'human suffering' to show the worst moments in the experiences of peoples in the hope that such

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Geraldine Kendall Adams, "When Museum Activism Comes to Life," Q&A (Museums Association, November 7, 2019), <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/q-a/11072019-museum-activism-comes-to-life>)

portrayals will contribute to the advancement of human rights worldwide.”<sup>17</sup> At the end of his article, Terance connects these museums to a much larger picture. He places museums in a global community and states that their contributions, even if small, further the steps taken in human rights outside their door and borders. Next, I will be focusing on two museums and discuss them in greater detail.

### **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

The Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, is a museum that engages its visitors with sensitive material and takes a step further to encourage activism. In their mission they state that their “primary mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.”<sup>18</sup> To tie their mission in closely with their actions they have three subheaders on their webpage that help visitors understand the institutional mission. The museum uses the phrases, “learn about the Holocaust, remember survivors and victims, and confront genocide/ antisemitism,” as a message to its visitors, but also as an echo of their own mission statement.

This museum wants people to think critically about the past and to reflect on it, but they also give them a contemporary message. They let the visitor know that similar actions are still being perpetrated around the world and that the world has not eliminated genocide or

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<sup>17</sup> Terence M. Duffy, “Museums of ‘Human Suffering’ and the Struggle for Human Rights,” *Museum International* 53, no. 1 (2001): pp. 10-16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0033.00292>)

<sup>18</sup> “Mission Statement,” Mission and History (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history>)

antisemitism yet. They provide that space of open conversation while also challenging them on current issues that may concern them. To stay more relevant they frequently update their information of new cases of genocide and antisemitism around the world. They create a robust dialogue around the Holocaust, and for the purpose of my literature review their article on refugees and immigration was closest to *Hostile Terrain 94*. In this article, they include key facts that people should know and provide links to other pages whenever they mention a person, place, or event. On the side bar, they have photo links to articles on similar topics or legislation such as refugees today and the United States Immigration and Refugee Law from 1921-1980.<sup>19</sup> This encourages people to engage with their material even more and gives them the benefit of getting a robust dialogue.

Terrance Duffy, writing in 2007, notes that visitors showed a desire for a shift towards discussions on modern issues of human rights placed in context with the past. “The staff often include survivors, but visitors complain that nothing is said about the relevance of the camps to contemporary human rights.”<sup>20</sup> In 2019, from examining their website and taking a look at recent exhibitions and actions, the museum has responded to this desire and strives to engage visitors with contemporary human rights issues. Now, the Holocaust Museum has multiple digital resources for anyone to access about human rights in the past and present. Manfra and Stoddard identify this museum in their article on powerful digital and authentic teaching strategies for the Holocaust, “The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum provides perhaps the most robust of these resources with ‘Voices on Genocide Prevention,’ an Internet talk show hosted by Jerry Fowler

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<sup>19</sup> “Refugees,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed April 7, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/refugees>)

<sup>20</sup> Sheila Watson and Duffy Terence, “The Holocaust Museum Concept,” in *Museums and Their Communities* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), pp. 452-456)

that posts weekly podcasts.”<sup>21</sup> In addition they mention that these podcasts have been focusing on the recent genocidal crisis in Sudan. By doing this the museum was able to fulfil a desire for knowledge and activism while still keeping in range of their mission.

### **The Lower East Side Tenement Museum**

The Tenement Museum, also in New York City, is a museum that explores the stories and experiences of immigrants and refugees coming to the US. Their mission statement is much shorter than the Holocaust Museum’s, but also still leaves room for the interpretation of contemporary issues: “The Tenement Museum tells the uniquely American stories of immigrants, migrants, and refugees in the ongoing creation of our nation.”<sup>22</sup> By putting in the word ongoing, the Tenement Museum is able to cover the history of immigration as well as current events. They spur thought and discussion on immigration through their collection, tours of their tenement building and neighborhood, and through the sharing of stories told by immigrants and their children.

They acknowledge at the forefront the fact that immigration is a controversial topic that can be polarizing. They write in *Immigration in America*, “we live in a time when the issue of immigration has emerged and become a sharply divisive issue politically. Skepticism about whether new arrivals will integrate into the fabric of our nation remains an ongoing theme in the

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<sup>21</sup> Meghan Mcglinn Manfra and Jeremy D. Stoddard, “Powerful and Authentic Digital Media and Strategies for Teaching about Genocide and the Holocaust,” *The Social Studies* 99, no. 6 (2008): pp. 260-264, <https://doi.org/10.3200/tsss.99.6.260-264>

<sup>22</sup>Kevin Jennings, “The Ever Evolving American Identity: a New Mission at The Tenement Museum,” American Alliance of Museums (AAM, May 6, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/08/15/the-ever-evolving-american-identity-a-new-mission-at-the-tenement-museum/>

public debate on immigration policy.”<sup>23</sup> Despite this controversy, they remind people that immigration is not a new controversial topic and that immigrants have greatly contributed to the US’s success. Below the small paragraphs are some statistics on immigration and the benefits that immigrants have brought to the US recently. The museum takes a solid stance in their positive attitude towards immigration in general. They give a good explanation as to what their position is and commit to bringing in diverse discussions and stories of immigration. It is through this and planning inside the community on future events and exhibitions that the Tenement Museum is able to stay relevant in the lives of their visitors.

Ruth Abram, the museum’s director, “believes strongly that history should be used to both stimulate dialogue on contemporary issues and actually serve as a foundation for addressing those issues.”<sup>24</sup> To address those issues they contact their community, being the people that surround the museum and those that the issue concerns, and ask for their assistance. The community has responded in numbers and shown its support by contributing to projects like “Your Story, Our Story.” This project reveals individual experiences through photographs, audio, and small descriptions. The museum writes to teachers, families, and organizations on the uses of contributing and reading these stories and how to connect them to their lives. In this way, the museum is helping to mediate discussions on their project while also opening it up to larger audiences to explore and contribute. It also gives the community an outlet to share their experiences with others to create understanding on an otherwise polarizing topic.

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<sup>23</sup> “Immigration in America,” Tenement Museum, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.tenement.org/explore/immigration-in-america/>

<sup>24</sup>Beverly Sheppard, “Do Museums Make a Difference? Evaluating Programs for Social Change,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 43, no. 1 (2000): pp. 63-74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2000.tb01159.x>

## **Conclusion**

Based on literature written within the past decade, many museums are making the shift towards using controversy as a method of engagement, education, and obligation to the community. Some of these museums are concerned about the repercussions, on themselves and on their funders, of presenting such sensitive material to the public. However, the literature has found that, while it can be difficult in the short term, in the long run museums and visitors will benefit. Museums stand to benefit financially and through earning the respect of their visitors and visitors are engaged in an academic discussion of issues they face. The NCAC has developed guidelines for managing controversy that includes open discussions, a devotion to freedom of speech, and the necessity of being clear and open about internal decisions and discussion concerning the exhibition. It may not be directly part of every museum's mission to engage visitors in controversy, in some cases visitors seek out museums as a respite from it. However, the museum's obligations to the community, their function to educate, and their cultural prowess make a strong argument for the inclusion and discussion of controversy inside the museum. The Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. and Tenement Museum in New York City both use these tools and ideas in their missions and projects to engage visitors and communities in their topics. They create discussions that are meaningful and relevant to them by using similar content and allowing people to share their experiences. They encourage understanding and learning while also taking their own stance on each issue. Other museums not covered in this review have done similarly, and many more can develop to do the same.

## Methodology

This paper aims to examine community-based programming in the USHMM and *Hostile Terrain 94* to see how they foster empathy and rehumanize people experiencing ethnic and racial discrimination. I will also discuss contemporary examples of dehumanization that contextualizes the programs. When I talk about community-based programming in this paper, I mean museums creating programs outside of their exhibitions that engage local communities and communities that experience racial and ethnic discrimination to work on a topic together. For this topic I will examine two relevant programs, conduct two interviews with people involved with the creation and monitoring of these programs, and develop a base for a new program for RIT's *Hostile Terrain 94* (HT94) exhibition. The two programs examined are First Person from the USHMM and the writing sessions from HT94. In each program, I look at what groups are participating in the programs, what kind of interactions are they having, and the experiences or thoughts they have coming out of the programs. I will be relating their interactions, experiences, and responses to empathy and rehumanization. Finally, I will critique each program on the issues they face in fostering empathy and rehumanizing. Based on these case studies, the interviews, and research, I will be creating the base for a program at RIT.

## Limitations

This research does not come without limitations. I have limited time and resources, the foremost being that I was unable to visit any of the prototype sessions for *Hostile Terrain 94* and will not attend any of the exhibitions until the one hosted at RIT in the Fall of 2020. Due to this, I was unable to conduct my own semi-informal interviews and participant observations at a writing session as I originally intended. Instead, I substituted this with research about prototype

writing sessions already done and media covering them. I also interviewed Gabe Canter, an exhibition coordinator, about the writing sessions he attended and some of the thoughts and feelings he and others had at them. I was also unable to attend a First Person session in person or go to the USHMM to visit their permanent exhibition spaces. Instead, I interviewed Luke Leyh about the program and did research through their webpage and scholarly sources. I also wrote this paper during the global COVID-19 crisis under quarantine in the United States. I lost more than a week's worth of progress due to moving out of college housing, power outages, and other unforeseen events. Despite these limitations, I aimed to write the best paper I could to respectfully approach these sensitive topics.



## Empathy, Rehumanization, and Programming

Empathy is a word with many synonyms and also one that is hard to put into words. There are two working definitions of empathy, affective and cognitive empathy. Affective empathy is the experience of feeling the same emotion as another. This is not to be mistaken with sympathy, as in having an emotional response to another. Empathy is sharing an emotional response where sympathy lacks that shared response. Cognitive empathy is described as taking the perspective of another. Many people refer to this as perspective taking, where people try to think about, understand, or experience what others experience. I will be using the definition of cognitive empathy and perspective taking in my paper to discuss how it fits into museum and exhibition community-based programs.

However, I also find it important to discuss that not all people are able to step into other people's shoes, or that they find it difficult. What I mean by this is that there are barriers to feeling empathetic towards others. These barriers could be religious, cultural, and political. Barriers are also made by preconceived notions of others, like prejudices, stereotypes, or assumptions.<sup>25</sup> This merely covers the issue of beginning the process of empathy as a practice, and leads to the issue of accuracy. Just because an individual wants and attempts to see things from the point of view from another doesn't mean that they do it with 100% accuracy. They may misunderstand the finer details of another's feelings or experiences or simply fail to understand them at all. This can lead to misinterpretation at best and manipulation at worst. The United States has also hit a point of empathetic decline, "research revealed a 48-percent decline in

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<sup>25</sup> Roman, Krznaric, "Empathy Why It Matters & How to Get It" (Lecture, Mountain View, December 19, 2014), Talks At Google, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN4MRYIoCS0&t=1929s>.

empathy over the past four decades, with a particularly sharp decrease in emotional empathy.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite this, 98% of people have the ability to feel empathy towards others whether it is accurate or not.<sup>27</sup> So, the questions follow, why are we experiencing an empathic decline, how do we empathize with others, and what can we do to help others do the same?

That first question has many answers and even more implications. The AAM and researchers point to the increase of individualism in the US and a turn to homogeneous styles of living, “ One significant contributor to the growing empathy deficit may be our increasing self-segregation from people who are not like us.”<sup>28</sup> The next question can be answered in a list of steps that culminate in making empathy a habit through imagination, practice, and experience. By imagining ourselves experiencing others’ lives, practicing empathy through listening and media, and searching to experience what others do we can empathize with others. However, Roman Krznaric also talks about how empathy can also exist on a collective scale and how empathy can be used to inspire revolutions to serve the needs of others.<sup>29</sup>

It is also through exposure and close positive contact with others that we can overcome empathetic barriers, “Contact Hypothesis, or Intergroup Contact Theory, states that, under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Merritt, “Empathy a Mile in My Shoes: Closing the Empathy Deficit,” American Alliance of Museums, April 17, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/2017/05/01/empathy-a-mile-in-my-shoes-closing-the-empathy-deficit/>

<sup>27</sup> Roman, Krznaric, "Empathy Why It Matters & How to Get It" (Lecture, Mountain View, December 19, 2014), Talks At Google, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN4MRYIoCS0&t=1929s>.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Merritt, “Empathy a Mile in My Shoes: Closing the Empathy Deficit,” American Alliance of Museums, April 17, 2019, <https://www.aam-us.org/2017/05/01/empathy-a-mile-in-my-shoes-closing-the-empathy-deficit/>

<sup>29</sup> Roman Krznaric, "Empathy Why It Matters & How to Get It" (Lecture, Mountain View, December 19, 2014), Talks At Google, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN4MRYIoCS0&t=1929s>.

prejudice between majority and minority group members.”<sup>30</sup> When we come into contact with minority groups and have positive experiences with them, especially if the contact is prolonged, prejudices and negative beliefs are challenged by new positive beliefs and experiences.

The final question I will answer in respect to community-based programming is how can programs help communities empathize with ‘others’? Well, part of that answer lies in the fact that many of their communities include ‘others’. As centers for community, learning, and cultural understanding, museums and their programs often cater to diverse communities. However, merely opening their doors to a diverse community is not enough. Fostering empathy also requires strategic planning of exhibitions, stories, objects, and programming, “the toolkit of a progressive museum contains... personal stories and personal objects about both tragedies and successes in societal and environmental circumstances past and present.”<sup>31</sup> Programming in particular is able to take museum spaces or material and make it experiential and conversational to create empathy across time and space. Museums and their programs can use their position in communities to bring different people together and encourage positive learning experiences that foster empathy.

Rehumanization and empathy have been used in tandem with each other, but few draw the connection to why empathy is so important to rehumanizing “others.” On the other hand, dehumanization is the process of tearing away the positive human qualities of others, often refusing to see them as human. In relation to this, rehumanization is the process of recognising

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<sup>30</sup> Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes, “Can One TV Show Make a Difference? A Will & Grace and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 4 (June 2006): pp. 15-37, [https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v51n04\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v51n04_02)

<sup>31</sup> Elif M. Gokcigdem, *Fostering Empathy through Museums* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016)

those positive human qualities and looking at another as human once again. It is, “ the nonviolent process of rekindling the sense of empathy.”<sup>32</sup> The process of rehumanization is one that is tedious, often difficult, and in the wake of empathetic decline it may seem impossible.

What community-based programming can do is rekindle empathy through personal interaction and building relationships with others. Face-to-face interaction with other people is a significant way that community-based programming can encourage rehumanization. “Museums, through their collections, can provide context and historical perspective around the migrations shaping their communities. And in so doing, they can promote the kinds of personal encounters, dialogues, and empathy that promote healing and ease the fears and tensions between refugees and established residents.”<sup>33</sup> Seeing and speaking to someone makes it easier to form relationships with people in other communities. Empathy is increased as you are able to listen to their stories and understand them from their point of view. This interaction can also let museums connect contemporary issues with issues people faced in the past which can foster empathy while serving the community. This point will be talked about in greater detail later in the case studies.

Empathy is intrinsically connected to humanization and may be the key to rehumanizing others. Seeing others as humans, and to treat them as such, requires some small amount of empathy. To understand and possibly to feel what another is experiencing through their frame of reference can make it easier to look at the numbers and see humans. In powerful cases it can blur

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<sup>32</sup> “Rehumanization,” Metta Center for Nonviolence, August 29, 2014, <https://mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/rehumanization-2/>

<sup>33</sup>Elizabeth Merritt, “Migration Reshaping The World: Migration, Refugees, And Forced Displacement,” Center For The Future Of Museums Blog (American Alliance of Museums, August 15, 2018), <https://www.aam-us.org/2017/05/01/migration-reshaping-the-world-migration-refugees-and-forced-displacement/>

the lines between oneself and the 'other'. Community-based programming is uniquely positioned to have people meet and form meaningful relationships that can cross ideological barriers.

### Case Study#1 USHMM:Forgetting and Ignoring the Holocaust

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, dedicated in 1993, has interpreted the past and present for more than forty million people from young school children to aged survivors of the Holocaust. Many of these people are also international and come from over 200 different countries and territories.<sup>34</sup> This institution caters to one of the most diverse communities in existence, the global one. However, just as they open their doors to the global community they also serve their namesake country and its citizens as a memorial and museum.

Despite this, many Americans feel no true connection to the events of the Holocaust. Americans have seen and read about the Holocaust, “as happening in another place and another time [which] would easily become a reading of the Holocaust as happening to others.”<sup>35</sup> The Jewish concentration camps were all situated in Europe. Any fighting done on the ground was also off American soil. This has created a void in our ability to both memorialize and empathize with the Holocaust, “the Holocaust is not a part of the civic religion of the United States...the Holocaust Memorial Museum [has no]... organic connection with American sacred space nor with the sacred spaces of the event itself.”<sup>36</sup> This observation also raises the question of how well the museum performs as a memorial. In addition, some believe that the Holocaust is

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<sup>34</sup>“About the Museum A Living Memorial to the Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum>)

<sup>35</sup>Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, “Understanding the Holocaust through the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum,” *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)* 48, no. 4 (1995): p. 240, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1425386>)

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Laqueur, “The Holocaust Museum,” *The Threepenny Review*, no. 56 (1994): pp. 30-32, [www.jstor.org/stable/4384282](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4384282))

primarily a European event.<sup>37</sup> This speaks to how some Americans see the Holocaust as an outside event that pertained primarily to “others”.

The USHMM, from its inception, knew that the Holocaust survivors were aging and dying. They knew that they must perform interviews with them and preserve their stories for the future. Some visitors may have no living relatives to tell stories of what the war was like or how it felt to be forced from your home. Unfortunately, people were already refuting the existence of the Holocaust when the Museum was trying to gain support for its opening. This claim continues today, “The Trump administration has... chosen to ignore that the Holocaust was a specific attempt to eradicate European Jewry, and that the effort almost succeeded because Washington turned its back on refugees seeking safe harbor in the US.”<sup>38</sup> Today, the USHMM is using its permanent exhibition space and programs to engage visitors in contemporary and historical issues of racial and ethnic discrimination. They foster experience based knowledge that lends itself to feelings of empathy for people that are beginning to be seen as ‘other’.

### **A Museum Designed for Empathy**

From top to bottom, beginning to end, this museum is built to help visitors become knowledgeable about and empathize with victims of the Holocaust and people struggling against racial and ethnic cleansings today. The mission of the museum is to, “advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and

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<sup>37</sup>Timothy W Luke, “Memorializing Mass Murder: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” in *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 37-64)

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Wildman, “The US Holocaust Museum Has Some Pointed Words about Trump's New Immigration Ban,” *Vox* (*Vox*, February 1, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/2017/2/1/14471032/us-holocaust-memorial-museum-refugee-ban-jews-holocaust>)

to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.”<sup>39</sup> In one of the museum’s most integral documents, it emphasizes the importance of knowledge, reflection and morality. This is a mission unlike many others as it wants its visitors to use the information and memories supplied to them about the past to think about their own life in the present. This connection between past and present events is rare in museums, even more so with controversial topics of race and ethnicity. There is a consistent theme throughout the Holocaust Museum of creating experiences for visitors to engage in as a way to learn and empathize with them, “The Holocaust museum, in other words, is what I would call an experiential museum, and is part of a larger trend in American mass culture toward the experiential as a mode of knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> These experiences include the museum’s engagement tactics involving programming that reaches outside the museum and the design of its exhibition space.

### ***First Person***

The USHMM runs a large program, called *First Person*, a program that invites Holocaust survivors onto a stage to discuss their life stories and experiences. “The Museum’s *First Person* program enables visitors to hear Holocaust survivors tell their life stories in their own words, uniting personal experience with history in a way that is extraordinary in its immediacy and

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<sup>39</sup>“About the Museum A Living Memorial to the Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum>)

<sup>40</sup>Alison Landsberg, “America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy,” *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997): p. 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488559>)



power.”<sup>41</sup> Survivors share their experiences with a live audience of museum visitors who can ask them questions at the end. The next sessions run from March 11th until August 6th, 2020, every Wednesday and Thursday at 11am. This time period is one of the busiest for the museum, so the program also gets a lot of traffic and each conversation lasts about an hour. This is enough time for a conversation between journalist Bill Benson and a survivor with a question and answer session directly afterward. Entrance into this program is free and on a first come first served basis, it is open to the general public and doesn’t require tickets to participate.

This program has also opened itself to a new audience for museums. They live stream the interviews on their website, use tweets to ask questions, have a podcast series, and place recordings of the sessions on YouTube.<sup>42</sup> As mentioned earlier, the USHMM reaches a global audience. By using podcasts, YouTube, Twitter, and live streaming, this museum further engages audiences abroad that may not have the opportunity to come to the museum in person. This audience may not have learned about the Holocaust as part of their education, or may not understand key concepts of this historical event. This becomes an opportunity for the USHMM to discuss the Holocaust and genocide with people who have little knowledge of it. However, it can also become the museum’s responsibility to meet these people where they are in their knowledge and education. This can be difficult over online and social media platforms. So, this program’s wide participant range can be as much of an advantage as it can be a challenge.

### **USHMM Interview**

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<sup>41</sup>“First Person Conversations with Holocaust Survivors,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed February 20, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/visit-the-museum/programs-activities/first-person-program>)

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

I interviewed Luke Leyh of the USHMM over the phone about empathy inside the museum space, about their volunteers, and about *First Person* as well as about a smaller, but similar, program that no longer runs called *Conversations in the Lexus Center*. He has been working with the USHMM for about fifteen years and has a lot of experience in visitor services. He manages four staff members and is the point of contact for Wednesdays and Thursdays. On these days, he answers questions that are both technical and institutional. He often spends time connecting people to the right educators, historians, volunteers, and programs.

We discussed how museums are looking at themselves as community centers, where communities can come together for social, educational, and recreational activities. He loved the idea and it shifted his way of thought and it has helped him to think that way when working with visitors. It was here that we also began to talk about ‘meeting the visitor where they are’, “I feel like I really believe in meeting them where they are and I don’t know where they are and I don’t know what they know and it’s important that I get them to the exhibition or I get them to the program...and let the programs and exhibition do their job.”<sup>43</sup> As mentioned before, this museum has a global audience and what Leyh has noticed is that not everyone has the same knowledge of the Holocaust. Everyone is at a different level of understanding and of knowledge. Some people may have learned about the Holocaust in school, some, especially young children, haven’t begun this topic yet. There are people who learn about it from family members and have these experiences in their heritage. However, there are also people from around the world who don’t learn about the Holocaust or who may not understand the building block history of the Holocaust. In our discussion, we talked about how *First Person* was an excellent program and

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<sup>43</sup> Luke Leyh, interview by author, February 22, 2020.

how it is a great way to meet the visitor where they are. In this way, *First Person* also becomes an unforgettable experience.

We also talked about how the people who tell their stories on stage are also volunteers who work at the USHMM; they do not come from an outside organization. These survivors work closely with the institution and employees answering questions on the floor, in programs like *First Person*, and work the information desk. They are instrumental to the daily running of the museum and to their programs. Right from the beginning, the USHMM knew that the World War II generation wouldn't be around forever, "There's also the part that the WWII generation is not going to be around. That's on our minds a lot and it's sort of the natural order of things, time just keeps going on."<sup>44</sup> The survivors that volunteer at the museum and readily give their stories and answer questions are an invaluable source of oral histories to them. They give first person accounts of the Holocaust and their stories, providing a unique and personal perspective on the Holocaust through their experiences as children and young adults. "[The survivor volunteers] being here and speaking to young people and then hanging out in the break room with the staff and doing these programs and speaking about your youth, this keeps them going and it's wonderful to be part of that."<sup>45</sup> When visitors come to the museum or the programs, usually out of curiosity, Leyh is able to connect them to the volunteers. He spoke of how it makes something click with the visitor and a powerful connection is made. He also talked about the importance of, and how much he enjoys, connecting young children with the survivors. Since the generations are so far apart there's a significant age gap and being at the museum can bridge that gap, before the children even start learning about the Holocaust in school.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Not only are powerful connections being made between survivors, children, and adult visitors, the staff are also closely connected and involved with them. Leyh spoke about a familiarity some staff have with the survivors who volunteer at the museum. The volunteers themselves look like ordinary people, like grandparents or any other 80-100 year old, and many people pass them by without realizing who they are. Staff especially are able to talk to and interact closely with the volunteers at the museum on a consistent basis. So, for programs like *First Person*, staff memorize their stories and are able to assist them by taking the spotlight off them or being there just to listen. Being an active volunteer in the museum can also help the survivors. They are able to get out and talk with people and share their stories with youth. In a way, that can help to keep them going, and, hopefully, help in healing from the Holocaust.

What is very prominent in the museum, but especially in *First Person* is this idea of perspective. When a visitor walks into *First Person* it's different from the permanent exhibition, movies, books, and documentaries. "I think the permanent exhibition is very good for what it is, but it's also not a person telling you about their life and there's something about a person telling you about their life that colors your understanding in a certain way and I think that's still valuable every time we have a *First Person*."<sup>46</sup> The narrative and perspective of the story goes from an outside view to a very personal one. It's a first person account of what happened to the speaker. The survivors are able to tell the story of the Holocaust from their perspective so that visitors can understand it in that way. When Leyh and I spoke, he talked about how hearing the stories from the survivors directly makes the history of the Holocaust immediate to the visitor and that's part of the reason why he encourages everyone to go, including school groups, "I'm always trying to

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

get the schools to come to *First Person* because I think that it's such a wonderful experience for it to be real for them."<sup>47</sup> *First Person* is invaluable to telling the story of the Holocaust and it fosters empathy through giving a new and personalized perspective on the Holocaust to curious visitors.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

## Case Study #2 HT 94: Border Control and Dehumanization

Before discussing *Hostile Terrain 94* (HT94), it's important to understand some of the policies that inspired the exhibition. I will be using two policies, the 1994 North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) and the 1994 Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Strategic Plan. It's also important to discuss the ways that border patrol policies dehumanize and ignore the deaths of migrants. To shed light on this issue, I will be focusing on the use of statistics and numbers when referring to migrants and how their deaths have been pushed out of the public's eye. This section is necessary to provide a background to the exhibition and to show the importance and the impact of the writing sessions.

In 1994 the United States Federal Government passed NAFTA which is a free trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. NAFTA does several things but, for the importance of this exhibition, the elimination of tariffs on imports and exports between the three countries has had severe ramifications for Mexico. The USA proposed to Mexico, during their discussions, that the agreement would help them prosper economically. The USA asked for Mexico to open up its ports, but as soon as they agreed to NAFTA, Mexico was buried in subsidized American corn, "that crashed their economy and put millions of peasant farmers out of work".<sup>48</sup> Due to this, people began making their way north, trying to cross the border in hopes for survival, for themselves and their families, and for the hope of economic prosperity and opportunity. So, this act was a contributor to a mass migration of thousands of people who were economically displaced. This agreement is only a small piece in a long list of policies between the United States and Mexico that have negatively impacted citizens in Mexico. The US has also

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<sup>48</sup> Jason De León and Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), p.6)

made policies that affect deeper into Central America, some of whom “were fleeing violence in Central America that US interventionist policies had sanctioned and supported.”<sup>49</sup> Even now, people continue to attempt to move into the US for the same hopes and similar reasons. Many people are migrating in hopes of economic success and some others move due to political persecution or as a result of political corruption .

That same year, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) created their Strategic Plan that uses ‘Prevention Through Deterrence’ (PTD). PTD, “relies on the use of hyper-security measures such as high fencing and hundreds of agents on the ground.”<sup>50</sup> By increasing security, they also increase the risk of detainment. Therefore, by heavily guarding urban areas that would usually be popular places of entry, illegal immigration would be deterred or forced into other areas. These areas, like the Sonoran Desert along the border, are hostile terrains to those who don’t know its extreme conditions and make it easier for border patrol to enforce.<sup>51</sup> It’s important to note that the goal of this strategy is deterrence. However, it is questionable, and unlikely, that PTD actually deters migrants from crossing the border into the US, even if the desert is in the way. What is difficult in using deterrence as a strategy is that many of these people are fleeing from life or death situations. They are also inspired by stories of ‘The American Dream’ and remain hopeful, that as long as they make it across, that they can have that dream. It is difficult to deter someone when their only other options are worse than facing the desert. What many of them are doing is choosing to cross, despite PTD, and risking their lives in the hopes of a better one.

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p.33

<sup>50</sup>Jason De León and Eduardo García, “A View From the Train Tracks,” SAPIENS (Austin Shipman, February 16, 2016), <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/prevention-through-deterrence/>

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

As migrants attempt to cross the Sonoran Desert to reach the border, many of them are unprepared for the hostile environment. Between the hot days, cold nights, dangerous animals, and people trying to take advantage of their vulnerability, many of them die. In a 2010 report to Congress, these deaths were recognised as an unintended consequence. However, this is misleading, “and ignores previous evidence suggesting that policymakers were well aware of the role that death would play in this enforcement strategy.”<sup>52</sup>

As migrants are being pushed by the INS’s plan into the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, they are also being pushed out of sight from the public. When migrants die in the desert, they die in a space where the only people out there are Border Control, Coyotes, and Native American tribes. This space is both out of sight and out of mind to the broad American public. What's happening to these migrants isn't an accident, but a result of conscious choices that policymakers have made knowing that more people would die and that they would remain hidden. In addition to dying in a remote area, their bodies are torn apart by animals, mainly vultures, and are left unidentifiable. Any personal information they may have carried with them is also shredded, eaten, or left far away from their body. In an experiment to examine Necroviolence, violence that happens after someone is deceased, that people experience in the desert a pig body was placed in the desert and watched over for two weeks. During this time, “some skeletal elements and personal effects will be recovered over 50 meters from their original location.”<sup>53</sup> This makes it even more difficult to properly identify bodies and to inform families and loved ones of their death. Many families don't know what happens to their loved ones and are left unsure whether to

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<sup>52</sup>Jason De León and Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), p.34)

<sup>53</sup> Jason De León and Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), p.79)



grieve for them or hope that they lived and just haven't made contact yet. If the bodies are found, unidentified or identified, many of their deaths and information about their deaths is not made public.

When talking about migrants, statistics and numbers are often used to describe how many are detained, how many died, or are deported and the rate in which they die, are detained, or deported. Of course, it's difficult to use names and give thorough descriptions when writing or talking about hundreds or thousands of people. However, the extent to which the government goes to not release this information to the public and the act in itself is still dehumanizing. Many migrants died invisibly in the desert, were stripped of their identity by the desert, and are stripped of their humanity by being turned from an individual into a statistic. These policies and actions have led to dehumanization, dismissal of migrant deaths as insignificant, and to ignorance surrounding this issue. The HT94 exhibition and writing sessions help to recognize these people as individuals, rehumanizes them, and acknowledges them even when the government doesn't.

### **HT94 and the Writing Sessions**

HT94, as mentioned before, will be appearing at 150 different locations around the globe. This exhibition is sponsored and organized by The Undocumented Migration Project and Jason de León. Many of the exhibitions will be taking place during the fall of 2020, although a few prototype installations have already run. All of this leads up to the 2020 American presidential election where the exhibition will make an appearance at the national mall in Washington, DC. This exhibition is set up as a series of toe-tags that will be pinned to the locations where migrants died along the border. The border will be represented by an approximately 20ft long map. These tags of orange and tan will be laid against each other, many of them overlapping, to create a

cascade of marked deaths. Orange Tags represent people who are unidentified where the tan represent ones who have been identified. The blank toe tags sent to each hosting partner require teams of people to fill them out by writing names, cause of death, and age supplied by the organizers.<sup>54</sup> They get this information from the Office of The Medical Examiner in Pima county, Arizona, who have also made their information open to the public. This information is available to read through a border humanitarian group called Humane Borders at <https://www.humaneborders.info/app/map.asp>.

Each institution will have the opportunity to create its own programming, but every institution will have writing sessions. This exhibition is also a part of the Undocumented Migration Project which aims at raising awareness and understanding of the issues along the border. In their website they describe it in more detail as, “a long-term anthropological study of clandestine movement between Latin America and the United States that uses ethnography, archaeology, visual anthropology, and forensic science to understand this violent social process and raise awareness through research, education, and public outreach.”<sup>55</sup>

The writing sessions are intended for institutions to ask for the assistance of their communities. At the writing sessions, each institution sets up an area where people can volunteer or stop by and write. They will be writing the death information of individuals on toe tags that will then be hung from the map. They are given packets with names, locations of the bodies,

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<sup>54</sup> “Installation,” Undocumented Migration Project, accessed January 27, 2020, <https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/installation>)

<sup>55</sup>“THE UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION PROJECT,” THE UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION PROJECT, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/>)

ages, and the causes of death. Then, they can look through this information and begin the writing process. Institutions may also choose to provide other programs and activities during this time.

Since this exhibition is a global one, the communities that will be contributing to these writing sessions will also be extremely diverse. Not only will they be coming from different countries, they will be coming from different economic, political, and social backgrounds as well. Some people who have participated in the prototype writing sessions were first generation students and were able to resonate with the material in a different way than other students. This also creates different kinds of discussions at the writing sessions. Not only are students writing at these sessions, but this programming encourages anyone willing to volunteer their time to participate.

The writing sessions will be set up in different spaces and in different conditions around the world. However, there are a few recommendations and requirements that the HT94 staff made to ensure welcoming and engaging environments that cater to the different ways people will interact with the toe tags. There are a total of 3,205 toe tags to be filled, which also means that within Pima county 3,205 people's bodies have been recovered from the desert over, approximately, the past twenty-five years. That means that institutions need to think about how much time and how many volunteers they will have at these sessions. In this sort of program, organization is key in making sure the toe tags are filled and that they are properly installed on the map. Tables are set up with tags and instructions in the center so that volunteers can choose a space and begin. They will also be introduced to the exhibition and given a history of PTD and the Undocumented Migration Project. They also recommend having the writing sessions in a place that gets a lot of natural light and that can accommodate a section where speaking is

encouraged and a section where people can quietly reflect. By giving people the space that naturally lets them interact with the materials they are comfortable with it can make this emotional experience easier for them. They also encourage institutions to have volunteers sit and speak about initial reactions to the writing sessions. On the instructions for the writing sessions, the instructions that will go on the tables for the volunteers to read, it encourages people to write their thoughts on the back of the toe tags.

Being able to write on the back of the toe tags gives the visitor an ability to respond to the material and further empathize with it. Through this they create a dialogue with the exhibition and the volunteers can feel that they are a part of it. Despite this, these people aren't getting direct face-to-face contact with people in the migrant community, but that they are being directly confronted with this information. Instead, the writing sessions are causing them to acknowledge these people, their deaths, and the greater issue of PTSD. While volunteers are not interacting directly with migrant communities, they are still getting face-to-face interaction as they talk with other volunteers and with the coordinators about this topic.

### **Prototype Writing Sessions**

Approximately eight prototypes have already been made and run, this includes the writing sessions. Two of the writing sessions, one at the Penn Museum and the other at the University of Michigan, gained media attention, exemplifying how empathy is a part of the writing sessions, and giving insight into the thoughts of people involved. These two prototypes were also discussed in the interview with Gabe Canter discussed later.

The Penn Museum had writing sessions for two days and invited people from the general public as well as volunteers from their community to help. The entire event was coordinated by

the Penn Museum and the Wolf Humanities Center Forum on Kinship.<sup>56</sup> Some of the participants ended up staying for hours. In addition to the writing sessions the Penn Museum also held a lecture given by Jason de León and presented the film “Border South,” which he was involved in as well. The exhibition fit well in the museum’s mission and allowed them to explore this topic in their space, ““Our mission at Penn Museum is to transform understanding of the human experience,...If the Museum is able to provide an understanding of this issue to the University community and to Philadelphians writ large too, we will have achieved our mission.””<sup>57</sup>

According to Kate Quinn, director of exhibitions and public programs at the Museum, “Through ‘Hostile Terrain,’ we hope visitors will feel empathy for people who leave their homelands and make the trek to the U.S. in search of a better life.””<sup>58</sup> When people visit the exhibition in the museum space, empathy is encouraged and constructed at multiple levels. The exhibition is filled and designed with elements that people can empathize with while the museum facilitates and supports those who participate.

Since this type of programming allowed volunteers to write out the toe tags themselves, they also got a lot of reactions to them. It was important not only for people to see this material, but to interact with it, to touch it, and to work with it. ““You see the tags hanging on the wall, but it doesn’t really hit you until you start writing them,” exhibit volunteer and 1990 college

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<sup>56</sup>Tori Sousa, “Penn Museum Hosts Pop-up Exhibit to Commemorate Those Who Died at U.S.-Mexico Border,” *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/09/penn-museum-exhibit-immigration-us-mexico-border>)

<sup>57</sup> Brandon Baker, “In Memory of Lives Lost Crossing the Border,” *Penn Today*, September 18, 2019, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/memory-lives-lost-crossing-border>)

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

graduate Deena Schuman said”.<sup>59</sup> Many people responded that the material was very heavy and made them reflect on their own lives as well as the lives of the migrants. This exhibition helped the museum to be interactive with a new and diverse audience, as opposed to people passively looking and listening to material.

At this time, Jason De León was an associate anthropology professor at the University of Michigan, so doing a prototype exhibition of HT94 there was a good way to get initial information and feedback. This display was hung up just outside Room 2436 in Mason Hall where hundreds of students attended the writing sessions.<sup>60</sup> A large number of the people writing these toe tags were students and alumni from colleges and universities, even outside the scope of the prototypes. Some people relate to this material because they are an illegal immigrant, or they have family who are, others only hear about it, but may remember that their great grandparents moved here from another country. At this writing session a woman named Mancilla began to empathize with the migrants that she’d been writing about, “Mancilla wondered about the woman’s story, speculating that she, too, had a family and “just wanted a better life, but she couldn’t reach it.”<sup>61</sup> That speculation was the action of empathizing with another, she was informed about their situation and thought back on it from their perspective to understand them

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<sup>59</sup>Tori Sousa, “Penn Museum Hosts Pop-up Exhibit to Commemorate Those Who Died at U.S.-Mexico Border,” *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.thedp.com/article/2019/09/penn-museum-exhibit-immigration-us-mexico-border>)

<sup>60</sup> Maria Sobrino, “On-Campus Exhibit Draws Attention to Lives Lost across U.S. and Mexico Border,” *The Michigan Daily* (*The Michigan Daily*, March 28, 2019), <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/research/campus-exhibit-draws-attention-lives-lost-us-and-mexico-border>)

<sup>61</sup> Jeff Karoub, “<https://apnews.com/78192c544cfa4d0e9ce489e0c2a0f9dd> Click to Copy RELATED TOPICS U.S. News Michigan Immigration Elections University of Michigan Ann Arbor North America Immigration Policy Presidential Elections Project Exploring Migrant Deaths in US Aims to Go Global,” *APNews* (*APNews*, March 29, 2019), <https://apnews.com/78192c544cfa4d0e9ce489e0c2a0f9dd>)

better. Universities have people from many different backgrounds, so many of these students will also have different political opinions and can relate to the material differently. No matter the background or political opinion people remain hopeful that this exhibition creates greater understanding of the plight of migrants.<sup>62</sup> Having this type of exhibition and content engaging with communities in universities can change and ignite extensive conversation on border policies and the causes of migrant deaths. López, one of the team members for this project, describes their research, ““He (De León) humanizes immigrants in a way that other researchers don’t — he talks about them, he provides a platform for them to have a voice.””<sup>63</sup> These conversations can open up paths to changes in policies and in research. They can also rehumanize people by giving them names, ages, and voices where they had none.

#### **HT94 Interview**

I interviewed Gabe Canter, RIT’s point of contact and an exhibition coordinator managing the global pop-up exhibition *Hostile Terrain 94*, over Skype. Among many other topics, we discussed the significance of the writing sessions and the toe-tags, of recognizing this issue, and about engagement with the content of the exhibition. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Michigan, where he studied with Jason de León. After working closely with him in his lab, working on photo projects on protest, and doing anthropological work, Canter was asked to be part of the exhibition after college. Now, he works as part of a four person team

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<sup>62</sup> Maria Sobrino, “On-Campus Exhibit Draws Attention to Lives Lost across U.S. and Mexico Border,” *The Michigan Daily* (*The Michigan Daily*, March 28, 2019), <https://www.michigandaily.com/section/research/campus-exhibit-draws-attention-lives-lost-us-and-mexico-border>)

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

managing the exhibition. One of his many responsibilities is emailing and responding to the questions of half of their host institutions.

We discussed the beginnings of *Hostile Terrain 94* and its predecessor, *Hostile Terrain*, and what makes them different despite their similar names. *Hostile Terrain* is approximately a year older than HT94, which replaced it. From what we discussed, this older exhibition had artifacts and, instead of toe tags, used red dots to represent the deaths of migrants. There also would've been no writing sessions since they had no tags at this point. Canter described that there wasn't as much of a visceral feeling in this exhibition, "This organization [Humane Borders] posts so you can look at this map and see all of the red dots in every location where a body has been recovered and so first for that exhibit they blew that map up, but you don't get as much of a visceral reaction as you just see a lot of red dots on a map that got kind of muddy."<sup>64</sup> Since there are so many deaths on the map, the red dots would end up looking like red patches, making it visually confusing and difficult to look at. In addition to this, red dots don't bring the same level of gravity to this issue as toe tags do. The toe tags in HT94 are more symbolic of the deaths of these migrants, and of what happens to the information afterwards. It also acts to rehumanize these people, where they may have once been a statistic, number, or hidden from the public, now they are given names and ages. The ability to have this information written out for each person, rather than just a red dot, recognises these people and gives visitors something specific to empathize with.

The writing sessions help to shift visitors and especially volunteers from passive viewers to active participants in the exhibition. It also shifts the tone of the exhibition for them, by

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<sup>64</sup> Gabe Canter, interview by author, February 28, 2020.



immersing them in the content, allowing them to form a dialogue with it, and having them think about these issues by relating them to their own lives. Having volunteers writing on these tags lets people both walk up and read information on the wall and to write the information out and say these names in their heads. It was through writing the toe tags themselves the first few prototypes that the team, including Canter, realised how significant the writing sessions were. “we want people to say those names in their heads and to be aware of all the things that they’re feeling because we’ve done this like, our team has done this so many times and still every time there is something that like sends a chill down my spine.”<sup>65</sup> They realised by writing these names over and over, the death information names and ages, that this process is very emotional.

It was during a prototype session at Cyprus College that they were able to see emotional reactions in the volunteers, but also see how people had different ways of coping with the material. Since this college, and also the volunteer based, had many first generation students, the material resonated differently with them and the staff saw them talking to each other and then were able to join in. “we realised, ‘oh wow ok people come together, they fill out these tags, it is emotional and everyone has different coping mechanisms and for a lot of people they just need to talk to the stranger next to them and for a lot of people they just need to be quiet’.”<sup>66</sup> This is where Canter and the staff noticed that the writing sessions should accommodate the different coping mechanisms that people have. For example, Canter talked about how in this same prototype there was a group of three girls who barely knew each other, but after the writing session had talked and shared how they had all lost a close loved one. So they all had this loss in their lives that they shared with each other because of the writing session and its heavy content.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

However, on the opposite side, he also described how one guy complained that he was dealing with this and connected to it personally and hearing people laughing and talking was difficult for him. So, this is where the team realised that the writing sessions needed to accommodate people with those differences.

He also talked about some of the different ways that people connect with this material. Some, like in the examples above, have a personal connection to it through the death of a loved one or because their family may also struggle with immigration. However, Canter discussed how people also connected with the names, ages, and the reporting day. This is also where allowing people to write on the back of the toe tags is important for volunteers. Volunteers can then connect to the people who are a similar age as them or who have the same names. However, the reporting day can bring up memories from their own lives. Canter described a moment where he experienced this, “I remember I was on my twentieth tag, and the date was June 12, 2003 and I was like, ‘I remember that day it was my sisters eleventh birthday and we want to see legally blonde 2.’ You have these moments where you think, ‘shit..this is’ and you connect that to your life, to a time in your life, and then think about where this person was.”<sup>67</sup> When people can read the information on these tags and then connect it back to their own lives, it begins that process of both empathy and rehumanization. They are rehumanized by the way the writing sessions give them names, ages, and a history where they once had none. Then, the next step that volunteers can take is to begin empathizing with that person by thinking about the person on the toe tag and their life and connecting it with their own.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

This exhibition and the writing sessions work against systematic dehumanization of migrants and recognizes them where many, including the government, will not. Canter told me of a girl that he met at one of the prototype writing sessions. When he went to talk with her, she explained, ““You know you have this spreadsheet in front of you and your writing all this information onto a tag and she said it was just like reaffirms the idea that we’re all just numbers and data on a spreadsheet.””<sup>68</sup> He explained that since that discussion the team has made sure to be explicit, when talking to visitors and volunteers, in explaining that this is not just data on a spreadsheet. They want them to read these names, say them in their heads, and to be aware of their thoughts and feelings. Canter also expressed that at one point he felt that the team and this exhibition wasn’t doing the immigrants or their families justice. He worried that they were not properly memorializing them since the information that they are presenting is only about their deaths and that means little to their families. Jason de León admitted that, ““the truth is that we’re not memorializing them but we are acknowledging them and we are acknowledging these deaths and we’re acknowledging these people and that’s what we need to do because the government isn’t.””<sup>69</sup>

While this exhibition doesn’t allow for personal interaction with migrants or communities like *First Person* does, it still recognises the need that some people have for interaction. It also allows visitors to create a dialogue with the content by letting them respond to it and include their responses in the exhibition. This is an important step to the rehumanization of and fostering empathy for migrants. Those who run the programs and the exhibition need to take care in what they say and do as it will affect the way visitors and volunteers view migrants. What also makes

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

this exhibition important to rehumanization and empathy is that it is challenging museums to exhibit difficult topics and engage their communities with it. This can make the museum think about the programs they do and can change future exhibitions.

## My Program

For the community-based program I want to run at RIT, I would like to make an ofrenda, to be completed on either the 31st of October or the 1st of November, to recognize and honor those who have died on the US-Mexico border. I have three main goals for this program: 1) to create an ofrenda on RIT campus to honor those who have died on the US-Mexico border, 2) to curate an experience where both Latinos and non-Latinos can work and recognize this issue and honor those who have died, and 3) to do the aforementioned in a respectful manner by including Latinos in every step of the process and being responsive to their requests. Over the summer of 2020 and into the fall I will be emailing and talking with clubs to organize the ofrenda and the event.

The Day of the Dead and *ofrendas* are traditions in Mexico that have spread to the US that intertwine Christian and spiritual pre-hispanic beliefs. Preparation for both the *ofrenda* and the entire Day of the Dead take up the majority of the month of October, sometimes even beforehand. *Ofrendas* themselves will vary depending on available materials, location, and how much money the family is able to put into them. Traditionally, from October 28th until November 1st, “the household places special offerings on the ofrenda table corresponding to the kind of dead honored on each day”.<sup>70</sup> The offerings themselves are numerous, though I do aim to have at least a few key ones with the support of the community. Candies of all sorts, *pan de muertos*, marigolds and other flower arrangements, tequila or atole if RIT will allow it, toys for deceased children, candles, and *papel picado*. The main piece of the *ofrenda* is usually the photos of lost loved ones set on the top tier of the altar. I wish to place some of the toe tags from

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<sup>70</sup>Hugo G. Nutini, *Todos Santos in Rural Tlaxcala: a Syncretic, Expressive, and Symbolic Analysis of the Cult of the Dead* (Princeton: Univ. Press, 2014))

the exhibition here, especially since we have no photographs to represent people whose lives were lost on the US-Mexico border. I want to ask for the help and advice of the Latino communities, clubs, and organizations to set up and make the materials and offerings for the *ofrenda*. I also want to contact a few non-Latino based organizations to help and participate in this program.

Based on my research and case examples I've learned about, the importance of personal interaction with other people, inclusion of the community, and the ability to create a dialogue with the program are critical. For these reasons, I would like to host an event where communities involved in organizing the *ofrenda*, and the general RIT community, can come together to physically set it up. If possible, I would also like to invite people to bring a photo of a recently lost loved one to add to the *ofrenda*. I'd like this event to open up discussion between Latino and non-Latino communities on the issue of prevention through deterrence. I'd like the inclusion of other photos of loved ones to help spark that discussion. This helps people to empathize and rehumanize Latino immigrants by interacting with Latinos, sharing stories, and learning about issues they face.

## Conclusion

The road museums walk is often politically charged. Because not all perspectives can be told in one exhibition, it is through the process of exclusion and inclusion that institutions make exhibitions and programs that construct narratives for visitors and volunteers. It is this process of construction that makes museums the writers of stories, rather than merely objective presenters of them. Institutions take their narratives and present them to the general public for interpretation, interaction, and education. What some museums and programs have been doing is using their cultural influence and educational ability to engage their communities with politically charged narratives. Through community-based programming museums have fostered empathy and rehumanized people considered 'other.' My two case studies of *First Person* at the USHMM and the writing session at HT94 show how museums and exhibitions are doing this.

My case studies have three main similarities that help to both rehumanize and foster empathy for those experiencing ethnic and racial discrimination: 1) the importance of creating a dialogue with the visitor, 2) the importance of including different communities, and 3) the importance of face to face, or at least close, interaction with other people.

The USHMM actively works with Holocaust survivors about their lived experiences and personal stories in their program called *First Person*. These narratives are important as Holocaust survivors continue to age and there is a resurgence of antisemitism and Holocaust denial. To encourage empathy and bring back human elements to this narrative, the USHMM allows visitors to personally interact with their volunteer Holocaust survivors. They are able to speak with them and to ask questions to learn from them and their stories. The permanent exhibiton at the USHMM is wonderful for what it is, but the ability to speak, see, and interact with Holocaust

survivors face to face is powerful and invaluable. They also open up these discussions not only to people who visit the museum, which is already a wide range of people, but to people online. This way, people who cannot visit the museum are still able to participate in these discussions.

*HT94* is a global exhibition informing people on and recognizing the issue of PTD on the US-Mexico border. Having a global exhibition pushed this discussion out into a wider context and different communities, including ones with similar experiences to immigrants on the border. This exhibition is running during a time of increased hostility towards Latinos and stricter border control regulation right before the election of a new president in the fall of 2020. Each exhibition will have at least one writing session where volunteers will be able to write out toe tags and respond on the back of them. This gives them the ability to respond directly to this material and form a dialogue with it. People at these writing sessions are also reaching out and speaking to each other to talk about their experiences with death and about the issues of immigration to the US.

My *ofrenda* program is made with the three main similarities in mind and I aim to run it with the greatest respect toward the traditions and experiences of latinos. Therefore I will include the latino community in every phase of my program and ask for their help and advice to guide it. I want my program to foster empathy and to rehumanize immigrants, especially those who have died attempting to cross the border. Discussion between different communities and making a friend or acquaintance with them is an important step in that process. It is my hope that people participating in this program will come out with a better understanding of the issue of PTD, stories from other people about experiences with immigration, death, and family, and to think about the lives of others in relation to theirs. Understanding the capacity exhibitions have for



fostering empathy and developing exhibitions that address difficult topics is part of the future of exhibition and is part of what can make the world a better place to collect, preserve, and exhibit.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: USHMM Interview Transcription

This is the transcript of a telephone interview, with Luke Leyh from the visitor services department of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It was transcribed by the interviewer, Rachel Baldwin.

[Interview Begins]

Rachel: So, the first question that I have for you is, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and then how you got involved with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum?

Leyh: Yeah! So My name, obviously, is Luke Leyh and I started working at the museum fifteen years ago in January of 2005. Before working at the Holocaust Museum here in DC, I worked at The Art Institute of Chicago, it was my first big job out of undergrad and I was part of the visitor services department basically operating the building. So, I went from the visitor services department in The Art Institute of Chicago to the visitors services department of the Holocaust Museum in DC. So, it's just sort of grown from there. I'm a manager here, so I manage four staff and then I am the point of contact for the day. So, for Wednesdays and Saturdays I'm sort of the head honcho for the building. Head honcho might not be the word I should use, I'm sort of a point of contact. I make sure that the volunteers are aware of everything that's going on in the institution and what's happening for that day and then I check on them and make sure that

they're taken care of and pretty much that's what I do. I basically operate the building and then kind of operate the institution on a day to day basis.

Rachel: So it's kind of like if anybody has a question or maybe if something goes wrong or something needs help setting up they come to you?

Leyh: Yeah and that can be a technical problem or it can be an institutional issue. So, maybe there's another staff member who needs access to a classroom or theatre. I would either help them or orchestrate that help or if people have questions about the Holocaust I can either answer their question or get them to the right historian or the right educator. So I'm kind of the point of contact person I think is the best way to think of it. And I'm part of a four man team of coordinators. So, there's two of us that work from Tuesday until Saturday and then there's two of us that work Sunday through Thursday. So, we cover the week and there's always one of us here for when the building is open.

Rachel: It's good that you always have somebody on staff!

Leyh: Yeah and we're all trained to give tours and we're all pretty knowledgeable about the institution and generally about what's going on and also a lot of the specifics too.

Rachel: So kind of switching gears now to get a little bit more into community-based programming. I want to get your thoughts on what kind of connections people can make with

community-based programming in the museum. When I mean connections I mean personal connections that they can make with the program being *First Person*.

Leyh: *First person* is a wonderful program. People come to the museum, and we have the *First Person* program run during the busiest season on every Wednesday and Thursday, and people that come in might not have access to the permanent exhibition in the main part of the museum, but then they get to know a survivor on stage and it's a really visceral thing for them. It's funny that you talk about community. I went to a museum conference years ago, it might have been like twelve years ago and they were talking about environmental practices in museums and the idea of museums being a community center came up. I was over the moon about it, I loved that idea. It's a great way to look at it and it's interesting because it really sort of changed my view at the time and now I see it like that. I feel like it really helped me over the years to think of it that way to work with visitors. You know visitors come in and we are steeped in our content and so I feel that it's really important to meet the visitor where they are and to find out about their visit first and then bring them into the content from the institution. *First Person* is an excellent way to do that too, to get them into this program and they're gonna really never going to forget that. I don't know if that answers your question but...

Rachel: It did quite excellently actually! I just wanted to ask you. I feel like what I've heard about and read about *First Person* is that it really helps in getting people with first hand experience and engaging that community of people and helping people who maybe don't have those experiences or don't have family member who went through that and who might feel a bit

separated from the Holocaust, to understand it better and to understand those experiences. I've been writing around this in my paper, the idea of fostering empathy in visitors through programming. So, I'm not sure if you have any thoughts or connections that you can make?

Leyh: Yeah I do have thoughts on that. I do see the institution [inaudible] visitors coming through and so much of my attention goes to that. One thing I really noticed about the visitors and how they react to the institution is that, and this is going to sound really silly at first, they are interested and they're curious and that's really where they are for the most part. You know they're not Holocaust scholars or not here for high level academia, they are aware of the Holocaust and they're just interested. I feel like there was a lot of anger in the history after the Holocaust, you know, in the way people were talking about the Holocaust in the 80s. That changes in the 90s after our building opened and *Schindler's List* comes out. There is this curiosity by people who aren't connected to the history and that's very important! They're not coming from the anger of their family members dying, they're coming because they want to hear about what happened. It doesn't sound like that big of a difference, but it is. Kinda went off on a tangent there... but there's a different tone to that.

Rachel: No that's OK, this is just me trying to get your thoughts on this so I'm really just being a moderator here!

Leyh: Yeah, you know with the survivor community that volunteer here. There's tons of survivors that won't be active in the survivor community. With sort of the traumatic thing that

happened to them when they were young and they don't engage, and there a lot that do, and the ones that are very active in the museum it's interesting because they...I find that connecting visitors with those survivors, whether it be *First Person* or whether it be... so they volunteer with us too so they answer questions, they help us with the ticketing software, and they do other speaking engagements as well. So by connecting the visitors to that, to the survivor community is such a...I feel like a lightbulb goes off for the visitors you know? They really connect, it's so powerful. The only thing about the survivors is that, you know, they're just people. I watch it happen all the time, there are plenty of visitors that come though that pass by a survivor that have no idea they're a survivor.

Rachel: I mean they're wearing clothes and looking like a person.

Leyh: Yeah they look like a grandma or a like a you know a 80 year old. There is a separation between them and I think connecting them whenever we can, and especially with kids, like little kids. I really really really love connecting like younger kids, ten and younger, to the survivors because the generations are so far apart. People who were born in the late twenties next to somebody who is born in the late 2000's, 2008, 2009, 2010 because when they're old enough to actually go through the process of learning this particular history, they will have had that moment and there probably will be some picture somewhere in their family's you know...in their Google photos or somewhere they keep their photos.

Rachel: Actually, my professor and I were talking on Thursday after class about how children come up with the, like really young children, have the best questions usually.

Leyh: Yeah! Oh yeah.

Rachel: So, it was really funny that you started talking about engaging children with the Holocaust survivors and the volunteers. I thought that was really cool.

Leyh: And that's not something you usually hear from someone in my position! A lot of people don't really want to connect. They do feel the gravity and the profundity of the content and they feel that children are too young to understand it and I see it more as you learn in stages. I think that getting them connected is the beginning of a journey. You know, it's the start of something that's going to take a long time. One thing that's cool about the *First Person* project is that they are our volunteers, they're not like outside volunteers. These are folks who would be working the information desk and then speak. It's the kind of thing where it's like, 'Oh tomorrow is Susan's *First Person*? Awesome! She did a tour last week and now she's doing *First Person* I saw her last week. That's awesome!' That kind of thing, there's a familiarity to it, and being one of the museum's more key programs.

Rachel: I feel like we already answered my second question, which is the role of museums...and the role of the USHMM

Leyh: The role of how the museum is for visitors or for people who are volunteering?

Rachel: We can talk about both if you'd like!

Leyh: Having been here for fifteen years, it's a long time, and I've seen like people grow up here and you know I'll meet people who are in their 20s and talk about, or even people in their 30s, who talk about coming here in high school. That happens all the time and I was there when they came here, theoretically. It's interesting because we are a new museum but we're not new new. You know, the African American History and Culture Museum just opened like three years ago. So, they are like new, but we are old enough that people have grown up knowing nothing but the Holocaust Museum or you know at least it's always been in their world and I feel like there's a sort of an age divide there. People that work in the museum that volunteer at the museum who were instrumental in building it and instituting it and making it what it is, and then there's the people that take that work and run with it. I feel like I'm part of that second group. It's here and we're going to keep it going. And you know we have staff members, I have a staff member, one of my four people, who was born after the building opened you know which is...as I say that I realize you're probably younger than that, but you know like that for me is a big deal just that she not only doesn't remember a time before the building was here, but she's never lived in a world without the Holocaust Museum.

Rachel: That's really interesting because I also visited the Holocaust Museum when I was in high school and I don't remember a day where it didn't exist so it's kind of crazy.



Leyh: And I was talking about this with my friend and colleague the other day because that's like us for the Air and Space Museum. I've never not known a time where the Air and Space Museum was there, but my parents do. It opened when they were like in their 30s. My childhood had me going to the Air and Space Museum a bunch of times and loving it, but it's always just been there. If you'd told me it opened in 1850 I would've believed you because I'd never known a time without it. It's probably not that exciting of an idea but for us, we're just old enough that it's important enough to recognise these things. There's also the part that the WWII generation is not going to be around. That's on our minds a lot and it's sort of the natural order of things, time just keeps going on. One thing that's really wonderful is that the people that do volunteer here, volunteering is what you're supposed to do when you're retired, you need to be active. So being here and speaking to young people and then hanging out in the break room with the staff and doing these programs and speaking about your youth, this keeps them going and it's wonderful to be part of that. So they...I'm just saying this from my experience with the survivors...they live a long time, one just died at age 101. There was a survivor I talked to yesterday and I think she was ninety-six? But she's still doing yoga and you wouldn't know she was ninety-six you'd think she was eighty and in really good shape! Being here also we're stretching out that time a lot, but at one point the generation won't be here and we'll be in a new era. So a lot of people ask, 'What are we going to do?' I don't know. We'll see how it goes, I mean we're trying to, as an institution we're trying to, we use the term 'rescue the evidence'. We're trying to get all the stories and artifacts we can, all the provenance of the artifacts, and there's a lot of people working on that.

Rachel: There's also a lot of things to do...

Leyh: Yeah and you can't get everything...

Rachel: Yeah, but I think you guys are all the much better for still trying and doing as much as you guys do so that's my 2 cents. So, that kinda flows into the next question. Can you give me some background information on *First Person* such as when it was created and why? What's the reason?

Leyh: Hm, it's been here since I've been here. I believe it's not as old as the museum. I think it was in the late 90s early 2000's that it started. Why did they start it? I couldn't tell you the actual reason why they started it. I think it makes 100% sense why they do it. I can tell you that I was part of a program that we don't do anymore, but I was part of the initial stages of this program called *Conversations in the Lexus Center* and it was supposed to be kind of a smaller version of *First Person*. I can tell you a little bit about the reasons behind that, which I think are interesting. *First Person* is big. We have two theaters in the building, one's like a...I think it's a 178 people and the bigger theatre is like 400 maybe, it's a pretty big theatre. So, we have these programs and there was a worry that it didn't feel intimate. We have our moderator, he's an outside guy. He's not like a staff member here, he's a journalist and he's been doing it forever. I think he might've been the inaugural person. He does every one and there may be sometimes when he doesn't do it and a staff member will fill in, but generally speaking he's the one who does it. There was a

worry that it was too big! So, the idea was that we were going to have a survivor program where a survivor tells their story and there's a moderator, and I was one of the moderators, and we're trying to use this underutilized space in the museum called the Wexner Center and I don't know how big the room was, it wasn't that big. It was more of like a 25-35 people program and we would do it on busy days and like there would be like 65-70 people in the room and it was probably a fire hazard. It was an awesome program and it didn't take much to get a lot of visitors in that room, but the thought process of that was that we really wanted it to be closer to the visitor. We wanted visitors to feel closer to their stories, that was the original idea.

Rachel: So this is actually not on the list but you just made me think of it and I feel like I have to ask you. So I've also been talking about how for community-based programming the importance of personal relationships as well as face-to-face interaction and it looked like you were kinda heading that way with the discussions that you were involved with and I was wondering if you could talk more about that if you don't mind?

Leyh: Absolutely, were you talking about the conversations program?

Rachel: Yes

Leyh: We did have personal relationships with the survivors that we had so our job was to get to know the survivors and they would have a power point and there were slides of you know pictures, old pictures and maps and things that would help them tell their story. We got to know

them well enough and I knew their stories well. I had three people and I knew their stories well enough that I knew exactly where they were going and they did it different every time. They would always tell the story differently, and you know they're not pros. They're really just talking about their lives, and if they go off on a tangent they're going to go off on a tangent and they did. That was what was kind of cool about it. It was really kind of getting to know them and getting to know the way they speak and there was sort of a synergy there. I felt like I really connected with them and when they would get in...not trouble... if there was something with the audience, if somebody asked a weird question I would sort of be there to take the spotlight off the survivor. So, I knew what they like and what they didn't like and I knew what they could handle and what they didn't want to deal with. I might've gone off on a tangent...

Rachel: No that's alright!

Leyh: I think that's interesting because one of the survivors that was in that program doesn't volunteer anymore. I think she was having some geriatric memory issues and one passed away this year and one turned 100. He's still alive but he hasn't volunteered in a while. I feel like when his birthday came along I got really excited and I really felt connected to him and I hadn't seen him since he volunteered. The last time I talked to him... he's a very proud man...the cliff notes of his story is his story was about escape. So, he was able to escape Austria and make his way to the United States and then he was drafted in the Army and then he went back to Europe and fought for the Americans. Kind of an awesome story, I love his story.

Rachel: Yeah that sounds like a really interesting story.

Leyh: And then he stayed in the government, he was part of the military as an officer for a long time and then he finished his career in the state department. He's a very proud guy, and this is an interesting thing, the last conversation I had with him was when we were in the break room in the museum and I think there was some situation where he couldn't drive anymore and the museum was willing to get him a car service and pick him up from his retirement community to come here and talk and you know be an active volunteer. He was so offended at that idea he was just like, 'I didn't give money to this institution since it was an idea to have that money spent on a cab for me' he couldn't get past that and I was like, 'We want to hear your story, we want you to be an active volunteer we want you to be able to do this' He just couldn't get past that idea he was like, 'no you're not going to pay for my cab' and he stopped volunteering. So, I mean I don't know if that's what you're going for but I feel like you have these really strong relationships with these people. And I still want him to come here and tell his story. I think it would be worth his donation for us to pay for a cab, but I mean alas you know?

Rachel: So, when it comes to visitors then, what do you see them gaining by going and listening to these people and partaking in the program? What are they taking away from this?

Leyh: A couple things, I think that History becomes immediate to them when they hear a survivor tell their story. They see movies about it, they've seen documentaries, they've read books and it's all very distant and even going to the permanent exhibition. I think the permanent

exhibition is very good for what it is, but it's also not a person telling you about their life and there's something about a person telling you about their life that colors your understanding in a certain way and I think that's still valuable every time we have a *First Person*. I'm always trying to get visitors to go into it because I just think you get a lot out of it and a lot of times one of the things I have to do too is I have to talk to people on the phone a lot.

Rachel: Hello.

Leyh: And you know I talked to visitors, the visitors will call and they'll be planning their visit and a lot of them are planning school trips and I'm always trying to get the schools to come to *First Person* because I think that it's such a wonderful experience for it to be real for them like they have a...I think color your understanding is a really good phrase I think I would use.

Rachel: So then on the flip side what do you see the participant, the people who are telling their stories, what are they taking away from this?

Leyh: You know I don't want to speak for them, but I don't know, but I think...

Rachel: I was just wondering maybe if you heard anything from the backroom like someone telling you something...

Leyh: I can't speak for them specifically because, you know, I'm not them, but I think...I know it's also really important to tell the story. They all feel like it's really important that kids know, young people know, what they went through. I'm sure it's deeper too. I can't imagine it's not deeper. I think what's fascinating to me about working with these survivors is that you take any story about being in a concentration camp or hiding from the Nazi authorities and your mind just goes to what kind of trauma they experienced, like psychological trauma. And you don't see the psychological trauma when you talk to them. I don't. There's no remanence of it. I just can't imagine it's not there. I'd like to think that there is probably some healing happening for them, but I have no evidence they just seem fine you know? Yeah, I just can't imagine there's not more to that for them. They just seem so... all of them. And some of them are the kind of people that have a little bit of a negative bone, or something like that, and you can get them on a tangent talking about something and then they'll get kind of... and they're all different people. I am assuming that there's more to it. I can't tell you that there is, I just have nothing to back that up, but even still I still believe there has to be more to it.

Rachel: So, this is something that I'm really curious about, do you guys involve contemporary issues in these discussions as mediators or maybe do people from the audience bring in contemporary issues?

Leyh: They do. The idea of genocide since the Holocaust is a major part of what the institution is. If you breakdown the MO of the museum, of who are supposed to be, we're supposed to be an educational resource, and we're supposed to be a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, and

we're supposed to be a watchdog group for other genocides and genocidal situations. Some of them are very vocal about that, and some of them aren't, but it's definitely part of what we are and I would say we could go through programs and not bring up Syria or [inaudible] or Cambodia, but it's definitely part of it and it's considered part of what we talk about. We have exhibition spaces that deal with genocides since the Holocaust. We're building an exhibition right now, we just closed an exhibition on Syria and we're opening one about the Rohingya and that should open in the middle of the summer. There certainly was a lot of debate about that when we were in the planning stages. There's a really good book about the building of the museum called, "Preserving Memory" which I highly recommend. Which goes into the, not just the design and the construction, but the fights that went on behind the scenes to create the institution. So, I do recommend that and versions of that, I think, still exist today. I think it's a major part of who we are.

Rachel: So this question wasn't exactly on the list, but I think that I kind of, as we're speaking, I thought of. So I hope you don't mind if I go a little bit off. So, I'm working a lot in empathy and fostering empathy in museums, and I'm working with the definition of walking a mile in someone else's shoes, and being able to look from where they are and understand their situation from their point of view. I was wondering if you had any of those responses from visitors to the talks and the conversations? Has anybody come up to you and been like 'whoa this is...'

Leyh: Like 'whoa this is too much or like whoa this has changed my mind'? Is that what you're getting at or is it something else?



Rachel: It's really along those lines. It can be like, 'whoa this changed my mind or whoa this is too much' but it's more of a wow this really opened up my eyes, my thoughts, and it's given me a new perspective.

Leyh: Yeah, they don't say that that much. I can't think of a time where that's happened. I've had, not so much at *First Person*, I think if I got you to Emily Potter who runs *First Person* she might have a better sense of that because she's actually physically at the door when they leave. I'm running around doing stuff, but I've had people and I'll never forget it. I was on the museum floor and there was this, on the second floor where the permanent exhibition ends and this guy came up to me and was basically asking me a couple of questions that were essentially saying, 'Is all that really true?' but kind of like, 'Is that really true!?' [in a surprised voice] and we're like 'yeah', 'Oh I gotta learn more about this. I'm from Iran. I don't know this.' and so like I was stunned I was like, 'Oh yeah I guess you don't know this'. So, he was turned very much just in the sense of like it was something he had never [inaudible]. I've had visitors who were from Asian countries and they didn't understand the difference between Jews and Non-Jews and I was in the exhibition and I remembered I was trying to explain and she was like, 'what is the difference?' because all of these people just kinda looked the same to her you know and she just didn't understand and it was a religious difference and she was like, 'yeah, but what do you mean?' and I was like, 'I can't really explain it more than that'. That really opened my eyes to the idea of, 'oh there are other places in the world that they may not understand the building blocks of history in that way. You know it's funny because I also, well it's not funny, but I come

from the point of view with the visitors now, having worked with it for so long, I feel like I really believe in meeting them where they are and I don't know where they are and I don't know what they know and it's important that I get them to the exhibition or I get them to the program or to wherever they're trying to go and let the programs and exhibition do their job. It's really made me better, you know, at doing this because it helps me...and that's another thing... everybody, I wouldn't say everybody is on vacation, but everybody is away from school, everybody's away from work, everybody's away from their world, everybody's away from their city. So, when they come here I have found that to be a very powerful thing that really moves people. The idea that they're in a special place, physically, helps them out and they're not quite as weighed down by the normal things that people tend to do in their life because they're not at school, they're not at work. They'll even not be at work but this is like a work thing that they're doing. We'll bring in police officers and things like that to the museum and we'll do special programs for them. We bring in West Point cadets and Naval Academy cadets. I mean if you're in your freshman year of the Naval Academy, this is not a difficult day. You're going to have a lot more difficult days than this and you can tell there's a relaxation there. They come in and they're physically not quite as pressed by life and I think there's a lot of power in that and the fact that they are in this really physically interesting building that's completely alien to the way buildings are supposed to be and that's where I want to meet them. I always remember that whenever I interact with them. You know, it's funny because these are conversations that we're having internally too. One of our staff members in our department is moving over to another department and she'll be working on a podcast that the museum's going to put out, and I don't know when it's going to come out, but if you see a Holocaust memorial museum podcast come out this is what they're talking about.

It's also in our marketing division and arguably visitation, even though that's not really what they do, and so we have this conversation with them too. Right now, they're trying to figure out how to talk about the Holocaust in a podcast and I'm personally trying to get them to not be afraid that podcasts are something that you listen to while you're on the treadmill or walking your dog or whatever it's OK that they're walking the dog or on the treadmill. That's my personal thing, it's OK they also wanna hear about the Holocaust they wanna learn about the Holocaust.

Rachel: Yeah no that's interesting because if I personally were to click on a podcast I'm specifically clicking on the podcast because that's what I want to know about. If it's coming from a museum that means that I really trust him to tell me what's going on and to tell me the history of it and to give me a lot of different perspectives. If you click on it and you see Holocaust memorial museum talking about the Holocaust I think they know what's coming.

[End of Interview]

## Appendix B: HT94 Interview Transcription

This is the transcript of a Skype interview on February 28th 2020 with Gabe Canter who works as part of a team of exhibition coordinators managing the global pop-up exhibition *Hostile Terrain 94*. It was transcribed by the interviewer, Rachel Baldwin.

[Interview Begins]

Rachel: OK, so first question. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got involved with this exhibition?

Canter: Yeah, my name is Gabe Canter. I went to the University of Michigan and my freshman year for undergrad I took Anthro. 101. Jason de León was my professor, and that was also a fluke event, I wasn't supposed to be in that class and got placed there. Now, here I am because of it. We had a photo project in that class where we had to do a photo ethnography for a final project and Jason had said to the class 'if anyone decides to shoot film photography for this project' he had a dark room and he said 'you're welcome to come and develop' and I was the only nerd in the whole classroom of like 400 students who actually shot film and was stupid enough to shoot film. So, I went to his lab and got to spend time with him working on just development and scanning the film. Then I met these other undergrad students who were working in his lab talking about this undergrad research opportunity program at Michigan, that's

what it was called UROP, and through that then, right at the beginning of my sophomore year, I signed up and was able to work in his lab and he was on sabbatical on my sophomore year right after I took that 101 class. So, he didn't have any other student intern. It was just me and him. So, he really became like a mentor to me and we were working on various photography things that year and that was the fall of 2016 towards when the election hit and I started working on this photo project that was about protest, and so together we would go to different protests and the title was "The Generation of Protest" to show this new generation of younger folks who are getting more politically active, and within that same sophomore year of college I got to travel with him. He was putting up an exhibition, *State of Exception*, was an exhibit in New York. So, we went there for about a week and I got to see that whole installation process. We also got to go see some New York protests and then we also went on a road trip to Mexico City with his family and so we drove from Detroit, Michigan to Mexico City and I got to spend 3 days with him and his wife and kids and see the city and it was just a really great experience. That second semester of my sophomore year I didn't go to school as much, but I did a lot of work with the UMP and it was worth it. I went abroad my junior year and I did some anthropological work without him then came back my senior year. Last year, he was working on a new exhibition called *Hostile Terrain* with a different curator from *State of Exception* and a different photographer, his friend Mike Wells, his best friend from high school essentially. In that one, they had artifacts in the first version of it. They wanted to show this death map, this map of Arizona that online on [humaneborders.org](http://humaneborders.org), that's where we get our info too. This organization posts so you can look at this map and see all of the red dots in every location where a body has been recovered and so first for that exhibit they blew that map up, but you don't get as much of a visceral reaction as

you just see a lot of red dots on a map that got kind of muddy, and so there are five or six of us undergrads working in the lab that first semester and we thought, 'OK So what if instead of red dots we have it be this tactile thing you have these tone tags' because all that information that's on the humane borders site is all information from the Office of The Medical Examiner in [inaudible] county. There's like two forensic anthropologists who we're working with at the medical examiner's office and they're the reason that this info is public and there are sections of Arizona, like in Yuma County, they don't publicly disclose that. So we'd have to pay a huge sum of money to get that. So even the map that we're working with isn't complete, just because it's only from the good folks that have uploaded it, and so I'm skipping kind of around the questions because I see this other question. Why are you using toe tags? And it's because that all the info is coroner's office information and so we figured, let's order all these toe tags and fill out the information because once you put it on the wall you can walk up and read it and it's grim, and I'll talk about that later too just about the way I feel about it, but I think it's the use of the toe tags is obviously much better than just dots and compared to other objects too, just because of the way the information is given out to us. Once we were working on that project my senior year he asked me what I was doing after college and I didn't have a plan so he asked me and Nicole, who was also in that same 101 anthropology class freshman year who is also working as an undergrad in his lab, he asked us both to continue working after school and it was really just pure luck and circumstances and also because he was moving from the University of Michigan to UCLA and I grew up in LA and so in that way that we could bond in Michigan, hating every part of it and the weather and talking about our LA childhoods. So, he knew I was probably going to go home after that and it works perfectly, and Nicole had just moved from Grand Rapids,

Michigan, so we're both exhibition coordinators, that's our title, and we pretty much do all of the coordination for this project. So, we are employees of UCLA, people keep thinking we're grad students or something, but we're just strictly working on this exhibition. So, we have 130 hosts, Nicole talks to half of them and I talk to half of them, it's a lot of people and it's a lot of people asking the same question and then a lot of people not responding to your emails, but there's four of us on this team. There's me and Nicole who had Jason as our professor four years ago and Austin Shipman is our program manager and she had Jason as a professor ten years ago at the University of Washington.

Rachel: OK, so I think you kind of answered questions one, two and kind of five, let's go number three. How did this exhibition come to be? You answered it a little bit, but how did this exhibition come to be, as in how did you even come up with the idea in the first place? Why this subject?

Canter: When we were doing that first version it was supposed to just be for that *Hostile Terrain* exhibit, which confusingly is different from *Hostile Terrain 94*, which is what we're doing. We were doing it at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and to get ready doing this for the first time as the five undergrad students working in Jason's lab we were filling out all of the tags. So, back then there were just about 3,000 and between five of us it took about two and a half months. We just had to do it in our spare time over winter break and things like that and Nicole was actually working on a thesis, I think the only reason that this project got done was because she was really procrastinating on the thesis. In order to not write the thesis she

wrote over 1,000 tags herself. So, we saw the five of us filling out all this information over and over again, you don't get desensitized to it completely ever, and we even had one night a sadness party where all five of us just went up to the lab and worked late and played sad music and drank beer and cried. We just kind of realised writing over and over these causes of death, these different names, these different ages, it is really emotional. So through that process leading up to that show which was in January of 2019 that was when Jason came to campus one day and was like I had this dream last night what if, and you know when he has a dream his rule is like if he's still thinking about it three days later it's going to happen and I'm really scared because he just had another dream two days ago and so tomorrow I think will find out if it's happening or not, but he's like, 'what if we did this as a pop-up exhibit where we send it out DIY to ninety-four locations around the world', it was our initial number just because *Hostile Terrain 94*. It's from this border control policy that was enacted in 94, 'and so what if we send this out with instructions, but they have their communities fill out this information themselves' and initially we thought people could fill out a tag and then put it onto the wall immediately, but after we did the show for the first time we realised that there's so much organization required in terms of getting the tags onto the wall that there have to be two separate processes. You can't go one to the next. Still, we've done eight prototypes by now and each one we realise more and more how important this tag filling process is and so it's evolved so much over the year as we've explored different things that we can do. So, at first it was, 'what if we send this out to a bunch of people and then it was what if we also have QR codes people can scan on their phones that we attach to a couple different tags' because coincidentally Jason had been contacted by these two guys who were starting up this new AR and VR company and they were just really nice. So, they came out



to our Pennsylvania show in January and we got to know them and now they are fully developing this app that we're going to use that has an AR component where you can have this conversation with an avatar and they went to the Arizona desert in December with Jason to do a lot of filming so that you scan a tag and, through VR on your phone, you can see that location in the desert and things like that. So, we keep tacking on these extra things and we think, 'oh what if we had a reading list that we sent to people so that they could whether it's children's books or...' it first started with like parents want to come to this to fill out tags, but they don't want to have their kids sitting next to them because it's heavy. Like 'what if we had a coloring book and it's got something that kids can do and the coloring book was like pictures of the desert' and then that turned into a reading list where children's books and all ages, and now there's a filmography, and now we have a whole educational resource guide. Like the digital kit that we're about to send out to everyone next week, and our instructional manual keeps growing too, where there's more videos and more text to send and a marketing kit. So, we keep just biting off more than we can chew for the four of us, but we're really excited about it. What I think I was getting at was realising the importance of this tag filling. We had a prototype at Cyprus College, which is a community college in Long Beach, California, and the demographics there were much different than anywhere else we'd done it because the last time we did it was in Michigan and Jason was offering it to students for extra credit. They didn't really have the time to or give the effort to process it and stuff in that way, but working in this community college where so many of the volunteers were first generation students, first generation americans, it really resonated in a different way and the conversations, because we took our time, the conversations we were able to have with people, or to see other people having conversations, was when we realised, 'oh wow

ok people come together, they fill out these tags, it is emotional and everyone has different coping mechanisms and for a lot of people they just need to talk to the stranger next to them and for a lot of people they just need to be quiet' and then we realise, 'OK we need to dedicate a space for those who want quiet so they don't have to listen to the people talking' it's the tag filling and then now the events that people schedule around, not just the instillation, but the actual workshop now that is filling out these tags. That is what I am most excited about for this project.

Rachel: Alright thank you! What's the significance of this being a global pop up exhibition as opposed to just something that is just happening in the United States?

Canter: We've been exploring that each time we have a conversation With a different host and a different country, especially the international ones, we kind of ask them what they're hoping to get out of this and most of the answers that we get are about solidarity and talking about migration as a global issue. Our first European show is going to be in Lampedusa, Italy, which is a small island that's closer to Tunisia than it is to Italy, and it's a hot spot where a lot of ships come in and that's where migrants from northern Africa first hit or further East. Especially for that show, we'll be talking about connecting the Arizona desert to the Mediterranean and how they're both just these killing in murderess environments, natural environments, and that then other governments are just letting people die. So, our shows domestically we want people to have a discourse and talk about how there's all this death on US soil and nothing is really being done and especially just to have people say these names in their head and to each other. Then in

Europe for example it's about that solidarity and a lot of the shows that are there will be working as like migrant centers and so refugees there can see this happening on the other side of the world and know that it's not just them and we tell folks that they are welcome to write a note on the back of the tag and so they can interact with it in any way and write whatever they would like or draw something. So, that's been something really special that we've seen too, the notes that people would write.

Rachel: I think that brings a little bit of personalization into it. I think it brings the person that's writing on the toe tag a little bit closer to the material than if you were just writing the information, but you can also... it's almost like creating a dialogue actually! So, you already answered questions five and six. So then what would you like visitors to take away from these writing sessions? Or what have you seen them take away since a few have already happened?

Canter: I have three answers and I'm trying to figure out which one to throw out first. One, like I said before, reflection. At one of our prototypes, I was asking folks at a table what their initial reactions were and, I think it was the group from the Cyprus College that was specifically first generation students, one girl said to me, 'You know you have this spreadsheet in front of you and your writing all this information onto a tag and she said it was just like reaffirms the idea that we're all just numbers and data on a spreadsheet' and after hearing that we like have then explicitly in our explanations, when we talk to people and volunteers, we say that we want to remember this is not just data on a spreadsheet. These are people and so we want people to say those names in their heads and to be aware of all the things that they're feeling because we've

done this like, our team has done this so many times and still every time there is something that like sends a chill down my spine that either I didn't notice last time or it just comes in these really crazy waves. So, I think part of the weirdest thing is when you spend a long time filling out tags and then you put them down and you walk away and you get to go home. It's just a wrong feeling and we were at a school a couple months ago where there were people were filling out tags was just outside a classroom, and so sometimes at the top of the hour you'd have students start piling up waiting to go into their class and they'd be chatting, and I was filling out tags next to this woman and right behind us there were these students that were talking about about how bummed they were about not getting the purple iPhone and stuff like that. The woman next to me said, 'that's just a reminder that life goes on' and so it's just all of the feelings are just really complicated and nothing feels right and just nothing about this is right. Like here are all these people who are dead on this country's watch.

Rachel: Thank you. Also, in my research I've been trying to talk about the process of dehumanization. I'm also reading his book that also has a lot of the information that his exhibition has and every once and a while I have to put the book down and just breathe for a couple minutes and I get really emotional even when talking about it, almost crying. I think that's why I also chose this as my senior thesis, is because it was able to get such an emotional and visceral reaction out of me. I was like, 'there is no way that I can't do this. Like I got to!' and I think that's the only reason how I've gotten to this point is because I think I would've given up on anything else. So, I definitely understand that feeling. Like you said, as I go and delve deeper into this information I go to bed at night and I can't stop thinking about it and I

realise different things that I didn't notice before and sometimes when I read over things I'm like, 'why didn't I know about this or I can't believe this is happening, why are we letting this happen? I have a lot of questions and lots of things left unanswered and I have new answers. Then that just brings more questions. So, it's definitely a journey and one that I don't really see an end to.

Canter: I even still question if this project is the right thing to be doing and if we're doing it the right way or if, I don't know like, on one hand we're talking about memorialising these people, but we're not really memorializing them because besides their name and age everything on that tag is not about them. It's just about their death and it means nothing to them and their family. I had to set up a prototype by myself in November because the rest of the teams had a different workshop and I had this whole week by myself and it was stressful and exhausting and I was having all of these these doubts and criticisms and when I came back we all talked about it and I brought that up saying, 'is this information really anything but like... not exploitative...but it just feels like we aren't doing these people justice because we're not memorializing. What Jason was saying was like, 'the truth is that we're not memorializing them but we are acknowledging them and we are acknowledging these deaths and we're acknowledging these people and that's what we need to do because the government isn't.'

Rachel: Alright thank you. So this is kind of connected to number seven, but what kind of personal connections can people who are going to these writing sessions and the exhibition, what kind of connections can they make with this content?

Canter: A lot of times, the first step for people to feel connection is if they have the same name as the person or if they are the same age or mostly it's the reporting date because on the tag we have information for the day that the body was found. For a lot of people, they'll write on the back of the tag saying, 'this person was found dead on my fifteenth birthday.' Even the first time I was filling out these tags out, I remember I was on my twentieth tag, and the date was June 12, 2003 and I was like, 'I remember that day it was my sisters eleventh birthday and we want to see legally blonde 2.' You have these moments where you think, 'shit..this is' and you connect that to your life, to a time in your life, and then think about where this person was. That tends to be the first way that people connect to it and we just wrote this article for something at UCLA and we had a whole section about how it makes this thing that is so unfathomable and brings it into your world in a different way. So, that's the first step and then in terms of 8a [referencing the list of questions] if then these personal connections foster empathy, definitely. Just because then they're thinking about their situations in relation and all of those things. Like I was starting to say earlier, when I realized how special the communal tag filling portion is, we had these two prototypes two weeks back to back one at Cypress college and then the next one we went to University of Pennsylvania and seeing how people have coping mechanisms, people have to talk to strangers. The first time I realized it was at Cypress when a professor brought her class and the students didn't really know each other outside of class, and so they were like three essentially acquaintances sitting at the end of the table who did know each other well, and then I checked in with them about thirty minutes later and these three girls had told me, 'we haven't really talked outside of class but we started talking to each other because we needed something to do while we

were writing all this really intense information and we all found out that each one of us has lost a really close family member in our life' this one girl was like 'yeah she lost her mother I lost my brother and she lost her sister' they'd all had this close personal family trauma and started talking about it because of this. Then at the show at Penn the next week, I remember there was this one guy who stayed for hours and he would change tables to sit next to different people and talk with different people because sometimes people just need to talk either about this and they can have a discussion, which is great, or sometimes they need to just talk about something else. We had a complaint at that show because there was a group of women, who I'm sure just like were uncomfortable and needed to get their minds off of it, so they were talking about what they had for breakfast or something and laughing. Someone came up to me and he said that he was kind of dealing with this in his head because he connects personally to it and hearing the white ladies behind him laughing at something unrelated was just difficult and I totally understand that and that's when we kind of were realizing that you can't tell people how to react because we can't say like, 'hey please be quiet' because they all have their own coping mechanisms, but we can develop this in a way where we can tell all of our hosts, 'it's good to have a separate space for processing or quiet reflection and somewhere with natural light maybe' and so that's how we've learned different things, but for me personally seeing how people deal with this and checking in with them we figured out we would go from table to table and just ask the question, 'do you mind sharing some initial reactions?' and slowly that would bubble a discussion at the table, but seeing that and talking with all the volunteers quickly became my favorite part of this.

Rachel: So, kind of taking this information and looking at it from a broader perspective. What is your view on the role that museums or exhibitions can take in increasing empathy and why is increasing empathy important.

Canter: One thing that comes to mind is the show that we did at Penn was at the Penn museum and so we were working in the museum space and people were filling out tags, but the room that we were in was next to the Egypt section and someone actually wrote a note on the back of the tag that says, 'Body condition says skeletonization with mummification. I just walked through this museum past some mummies.' That alone to us was so eerie to read, realizing that it was so true. We walk every day to get to that room past a bunch of Egyptian mummies and here we are writing down this death information for a lot of folks who were mummified in the heat and we had a discussion, Nicole and I, the other day about the ethics of displaying human remains that are clearly visible and the ethics of putting someone up for display. We were also talking this week because we had questions come up on some of our pamphlets. It describes this project as an art exhibition and we don't really see it as art and I think that it's problematic to call it art, but Jason was saying we have that there almost as a way to get it into more places because more museums would be more open to having this, but we want museum spaces to be challenged in that way by using this project and having it have this difficult discussion and engage with its own community and bring in hundreds of participants to make it possible. Maybe the museum space can change the way it thinks about future exhibitions and the types of engagement that it chooses.

[End of Interview]



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